

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY



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NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 25, 1905.

Price, Five Cents

SCYLLA, THE SEA ROBBER

OR NICK CARTER AND
THE QUEEN OF SIRENS

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"



The last thing he saw as he disappeared were the eyes of Scylla, the Siren, gazing with a strange expression into his own.



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Scylla, the Sea Robber;

OR,

Nick Carter and the Queen of Sirens.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

SCYLLA, THE SEA ROBBER.

"I tell you, Nick, it is the most astounding thing I ever stacked up against."

"And yet," replied the detective, leaning back in his chair and relighting his cigar, "we have encountered some rather unusual adventures during the course of our experience, inspector."

"Oh, I'll admit all that; but here is a mystery that would puzzle the devil himself."

"Don't forget that I am still in the dark. You haven't told me about it yet."

The inspector selected a fresh cigar from the box on the table, and studied it with great care; then, instead of replying directly to the question, he asked another.

"How long have you been away from home this time, Nick?"

"It was seven months to a day, and almost to an hour, when I arrived at the Grand Central Station last night."

"A great deal can happen in seven months."

"Yes; or in seven days—or seven hours for that matter."

"But, in seven months, a man will get almost as much out of the running of affairs in the city of New York as if he had never lived here at all."

"I will grant you that. There is not a city in the world like New York in that particular. One may be absent from Paris two or three years, and from London almost a lifetime, and returning, find that very few changes have taken place; but let an old rounder stay out of New York for a few months, and he finds on his return a city that is in parts almost new, and a lot of people whom he has never known occupying his old haunts."

"That's as sure as you live."

"But what has all this to do with the case you have brought to me this morning, inspector?"

"Why, it strikes me as rather remarkable that you have heard nothing of Scylla the Siren, notwithstanding the fact that you have been absent so long a time, that is all."

"Scylla the Siren, eh? That has rather a mythological sound, hasn't it?"

"It is more than a sound; it is a condition as well."

"You don't say! Do you mean that this Scylla is a myth; eh?"

"No; I don't mean that. Not by a long shot."

"Don't you think that you have whetted my appetite for information sufficiently by this time? Or do you propose to keep me in the dark indefinitely? You must remember that not only have I been absent from the city myself, but that every one of my assistants has been with me, and that I am absolutely in the dark as to what has occurred here in New York during the last seven months."

"But, great Scott, man, there have been columns about it in the papers!"

"One doesn't find the *New York Herald* on the breakfast table in Japan, where I have been, you know," said Nick.

"Quite true. Then you have absolutely heard nothing about Scylla the Siren; eh?"

"I have heard something about her since I returned, but nothing till then, and nothing definite since."

"Tell me what you have heard; it will make my story somewhat easier," said the inspector.

"In a word, then, I have been told that there is a new kind of a pirate infesting New York harbor; that incoming and outgoing steamships are robbed indiscriminately; that a big liner—an ocean greyhound—is as easy a mark for the robberies as a tramp steamer lying at anchor in the bay; that the victims are inevitably taken by surprise and the robbery is consummated, and the robbers escape, before there is an opportunity to offer defense; and—in a word—that the robbers escape as mysteriously as they appear, leaving no trace behind, either as to how they came aboard the vessel, or how the escape from it is made."

"Well, that will do very well for a starter. Let me give you a case in point."

"That is exactly what I wish you would do."

"One week ago to-day, at half-past ten o'clock in the morning, the steamship *Jupiter*, of the Planet Line, was steaming down the bay, having just started on her voyage eastward. She was exactly in the Narrows when the purser retired for a moment to his office, in pursuit of his duty.

"The purser's name is Conley. He had just taken his seat at his desk, and believed himself to be alone in the office—he had closed the door when he entered it, and the door is latched by a spring lock—when he heard the voice of a woman proceeding from directly behind his chair.

"He wheeled his chair suddenly, too surprised at the

interruption to stop to consider what he was doing, and found himself gazing into the muzzle of an exceedingly ugly-looking .44 Colt."

"I've never happened to notice that end of a revolver when it did not look ugly, have you, inspector?" asked the detective.

"Can't say I have. But to proceed."

"Yes; go ahead."

"Behind the revolver was a woman—or a girl; anyhow, a female. Conley says she looked like a chorus girl who had just stepped off the stage. She wore some sort of a robe which trailed from her shoulders to her feet, and only half concealed the fact that there were tights underneath it. Tights, and a skirt, mind you, not unlike—according to Conley's description—some of the bathing suits one sees at Ocean Grove at this season of the year."

"Humph!" remarked the detective, smiling, "go on, Steve. You are getting interesting."

"Her whole costume was a sort of blending of light blue and gray, and there were spangles all over it, such as one sees on the costumes of mermaids in the side shows and museums."

"I see. Well?"

"There was a half mask of the same description over the upper part of her face, and she stood with the robe I have mentioned, draped over her left arm, so that it would not impede her movements if she should have to move quickly—and all the time the revolver was looking at him straight between the eyes."

"Rather an interesting *tableau*, that," said Nick. "I almost wish that I might have been in Conley's place."

"Well, he would have been mighty glad if you had been, for I can assure you that he did not enjoy it at all."

"What happened next?"

"I have already told you that he was startled by hearing the voice of a woman proceeding from directly behind him. What he heard was this:

"'Mr. Conley?' said the voice, precisely as if a passenger had entered the room and merely wished to speak to him; and then he wheeled his chair to find himself looking into the muzzle of the pistol."

"Precisely. Well?"

"'Where the devil did you come from?' he exclaimed, when he saw the woman in the strange costume; and——"

"Wait a moment. Had this man Conley never heard of the visitations of Scylla the Siren?"

"Sure he had. But, like all others, he took no stock in the stories."

"Took no stock in them? I thought it was generally accepted that her visitations were facts."

"So it is—all save the apparently supernatural part of them. I will wager now that if you will go aboard any one of the steamships in the harbor and question the

officers, they will, every one of them, tell you that 'if Scylla comes aboard my ship, she won't get away.' Well, that is the way Conley felt about it. He had never taken any stock in the stories, and he did not feel in the least afraid of an encounter with the pirate—for that is what she is, you know—least of all did he expect to see her in person."

"Well, go ahead with the story."

"Where the devil did you come from?" he demanded.

"From the bottom of the sea," she replied.

"What do you want here?" he asked, then.

"For reply, Conley says she smiled at him and pointed toward the safe. Then, to make a long story short, she commanded him to open the safe, in which, by the way, there was one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in gold."

"In bullion, or in coin?" asked the detective.

"In coin. Done up in packages of fifty double eagles each. Now, the remarkable thing about what happened then was that she produced from under her robe a lot of oiled-silk bags, each of which was capable of containing five of the packages.

"At the point of her pistol she compelled Conley to fill each of the bags with the gold, and these were connected, one with another, by a stout cord of hemp. Do you begin to understand?"

"I am following your recital as closely as I can."

"When the filled bags were tied together so that the whole hundred and fifty thousand had been taken from the safe, she compelled Conley to thrust them, one by one, through the porthole of his cabin."

"And drop them into the sea?" asked the detective.

"Exactly. You see, the hemp cord connected the bags containing the gold at a distance of three or four feet apart. To the last of the bags was a much longer piece of cord, and to the end of that was a round, bladder-like float. The whole business was pitched into the sea somewhere between the Narrows and Sandy Hook. Conley could not tell exactly where it was, for he had no guide to go by save his recollection of the time that might have elapsed after he went to his cabin."

"I see."

"When the stuff was pitched into the sea, the woman suddenly raised her left hand from beneath the folds of her robe, and pointed a second weapon at him. This she fired; but it was not the same sort of a weapon as the other. It contained a liquid."

"A liquid? What was it?"

"Conley hasn't an idea. It smarted his eyes and he was on the point of crying out when he got a clip on the back of his head which knocked him out."

"Well? What next?"

"Nothing next."

"Eh? Is that all?"

"That is the end of the story. When Conley came to his senses, he was lying on his back on the floor of his

cabin. The safe where the gold was kept was open. The port through which he had been forced to thrust the gold was also open. He was alone.

"He jumped to his feet and looked into the safe, thinking that he might be mistaken, but the gold was gone, all right. Then he rushed on deck, and straight to the captain, to whom he told his story.

"Now, Nick, of course there are several details connected with this and other stories of the same kind, which I have not yet explained, but that is the gist of the story. The woman had disappeared. Conley's story was not believed by the captain at first, but, at his earnest request, he was sent back to New York by the pilot boat, and he came to me with his story."

"And you believed it, eh?"

"I had to believe it. It is so precisely like others I have heard that all the world is beginning to believe them now, although it is only since this robbery and one other that credence has been placed in them. Before that, they were considered too fishy; but I have made up my mind that Conley told the truth, and that there is much more in the 'Scylla the Siren' tales than we have any idea of. Besides, I have a man waiting outside who will tell you a strange tale about her. Shall I have him come in now?"

"Yes. By all means. Let's have him in at once."

CHAPTER II.

A WEIRD AND WONDERFUL TALE.

The man who entered the room at the request of the inspector was a typical sea dog; a sea captain of the old school, who explained in a few characteristic phrases that he was in command of the tramp steamer *Phryne*, of Glasgow, now lying at anchor off Liberty Island.

"I'm Capt. Bob Staples," he said, accepting a chair and placing one of his feet upon another. "I've been in command of the *Phryne* ever since she was launched, but I've never seen no sich doin's as I've come here to tell you about since I've followed the sea, and that has been for more'n forty year, man an' boy. I've heard tell about Scylla and Charybdis, an' I've seen some rocks in my time off the coast of Greece that they call by that name, but I never s'posed that Scylla was a real live mortal until I ran afoul of her here in the waters of New York Bay."

"Then you have been afoul of her, have you, captain?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir, I have; leastwise, of the gal wot they calls by that name; an' I s'pose it's as good a name as another when you come to describe a woman."

"What did she look like, captain?"

"Well, sir, I ain't much good at describin' things, but I remember the days when I used to go to see the 'Black Crook' at the old Niblo's Theater when I happened to be in this port, an' you kin rate me as a 'foremasthand if

I'm lyin' when I tell you that she looks jest as if she had stepped down out of that air play-actin' piece."

He paused long enough to stow away in his jaws a huge wad of fine cut, and then he continued:

"When she came aboard of the *Phryne* I was sittin' in my cabin goin' over a lot of figgers that I had to do, and figgers an' me don't get on very well together, so they was a-botherin' me like sixty. When I wasn't a-figgerin' I was swearin', because I couldn't seem to make 'em come right, nohow; and I had give orders that I wasn't to be interrupted on any account.

"First thing I knowed, somebody said, right in my weather ear, 'Hullo, Cap'n Bob!'

"Well, I wheeled around mighty quick, and reached for something to throw at whoever it was who had come in uninvited; but I didn't reach fur, 'cos there was a gun that made me think of the old-fashioned blunderbusses you read about, a-starin' me right in the face, and it warn't more'n three feet from my nose, either; and then I spied the 'Black Crook' gal a-standin' abaft of it, an' I knowed that it was up to me to sit still.

"'Hullo yourself!' says I, 'what in he—— Beg parding, I didn't notice that you was a woman—what in hullabaloo do you want?'

"Well, sir, she only grinned at me, showin' her purty teeth under the edge of the mask, and with her eyes a-gleamin' through the holes of it, like two stars in the southern heavens. I s'pose you know that stars are a heap brighter below the line than they are hereabouts."

"Yes; I have heard that," admitted the detective. "Go on with your story, captain, for it is very interesting. But first tell me when this happened?"

"Well, sir, as near as my reckonin' 'll show, it was the night following the same day that the purser aboard the *Jupiter* was held up."

"What happened next, captain?"

"I jest watched her till she quit grinnin' an' I never said another word; but arter a little she says, says she, 'Cap'n, ain't ye goin' ter arsk me to have a seat?'

"'Well, miss,' says I, 'seein' as how you ain't got any too many clothes on ye, I thought ye might feel a leetle delicate about settin' down'; but Lord bless you, sir, she only larfed fit to kill, an' she warped up alongside of an armchair that was on t'other side of the table from me, and says she, settin' on the arm of it, says she:

"'Cap'n, I understand that you have got a few casks of fine old Madeira wine in your cargo.'

"'I hev,' says I.

"'I want one of 'em,' says she. 'Would you oblige me by heavin' one of 'em overboard?'

"'Doin' what?' says I. 'Heave one of them casks of wine overboard? Not by a damsite, savin' your presence, miss.'

"Well, sir, that air smile died outen her face jest exactly as mebbly you've seen the sun git behind a cloud,

'fore now, as though somebody had spanked it fur its mother; an' the hull outfit o' stars in the southern heavens weren't a binnacle light alongside o' the way them eyes o' her'n spit fire at me as she says, quiet-like:

"'Cap'n, this here gun o' mine is sorter tender about the tackle, an' it's likely to drag its doggoned anchor at a'most any minute. Now, if you'll be real obligin', you'll touch that air bell at your elbow after I have stepped behind this here curtain, and when your steward shows up, you'll tell him to call the third mate, as is on deck at this blessed minit, an' you'll order that him and the mate is to heave that air cask o' wine wot you've got stowed away in the pantry for your own private use, but which you ain't had broached yet—you'll order the steward and the mate to roll that air cask out on the deck and heave it overboard.'

"I expect that my jaw sorter dropped, 'cos she larfed ag'in, jest es if there war suthin' funny about it, and says she:

"'Cap'n, if either of 'em look surprised, you kin tell 'em that you've climbed up onto the water waggin and are sort of ashamed that you stole that air cask.'

"'I didn't steal it,' says I. 'The owners——'

"But she wouldn't let me say no more, an' I knowed by the glint in her eyes through the holes in her mask that she meant it when she said she was in a hurry.

"She stepped behind the curtain and I rang for the steward and gave the order.

"He looked as if he had a fit when he heard the order, but he knowed me well enough to do as I said without waitin' to arsk questions; and, arter a little, back he comes with the report that it was done; and he looked so fidgety that I asked him wot was the matter, and says he:

"'Cap'n, there was a long boat alongside, lying just out there in the dark, and she laid fast to the cask and towed it away the minnit it struck the water.'

"I thought I heerd a chuckle from behind the curtain, but I wasn't sure; anyhow it made me mad, and so I roared at the steward:

"'What d'ye take me fur? D'ye think I'm a cussed lubber to chuck a cask o' good wine adrift without knowin' that there would be somebody there to pick it up?' And then I made as if I was goin' to heave the inkstand at him, and he lit out.

"Well, sir, Miss Scylla slips her moorings behind the curtain and sails into the cabin again, larfin' to beat the band, and says she:

"'Cap'n, that was well done. I'm very much obleeged to ye,' says she. 'Good-night!'

"Out she goes, with that, through the cabin door jest as if she owned the hull darned vessel; but she hadn't more'n got hull down in the offing afore I was after her under a full head of steam, and with every sail set.

"But bless ye! I might as well ha' tried to follow one

o' Mother Cary's chickens, fur I didn't see a thing when I landed on deck. I heard suthin', though. It war a splash in the water, and I made sure that she had dodged overboard, so I ups with a life-preserver and chucks it into the water and then I dove over arter her.

"It was a hot night and I didn't have any too many clothes on myself—jest a shirt and trousers and a pair o' Chinese sandals, which I kicked off."

The captain stopped abruptly at this point and spat out the tobacco. At the same time he bristled up as if something had angered him, and he rested his eyes fiercely upon the detective; so fiercely that Nick wondered what had happened to anger the man, and would have been disturbed, had he not caught a gleam of amusement in the eyes of the inspector, who was seated a little distance from them, at what the captain would have described as the weather beam.

So Nick kept silent, and waited.

"Cap'n Carter," said the sailor, presently, speaking very slowly, as if he were deeply in earnest, "I now come to a part of my yarn which most people are dodgasted mean enough to say as how they don't believe it. I refused to tell it to you, when the inspector here arsked me to do it, but when he assured me that you would believe every word I told you as bein' the gospel truth, I agreed to cast loose my jaw tackle fur your benefit. But I want to tell you right here, if you don't believe wot I'm goin' to tell you, I'll jest jibe around and scud off to leeward. Somehow I ain't never accustomed myself to bein' called a liar."

"I hope, captain, that you will continue your story to the end and tell me all that happened," said the detective.

"An' you'll believe me if I assure you that what I say to you is the gospel truth?"

"Certainly."

"Well, sir, then here goes. I ain't got no call to lie to you, an' I'm only tellin' you what actually occurred to me. If so be as you're surprised, you can jest figger on how flabbergasted I was."

"All right. I will do that."

"Well, I dove into the sea arter that air young woman. Mebby I ain't told you yet that the time was mighty close to eight bells in the night watch, which is what you call midnight ashore, an' it was darker'n a pocket comin' out of the cabin onto the deck so suddin-like.

"I struck the water headfirst, of course, and as the *Phryne* is only in ballast 'ceptin' a few casks of wine, she stands rather high outen the water. So you see it was some considerable distance from her deck to the water.

"I thought I seed the Scylla gal a-glistenin' in the water afore I dove, but I wasn't dead certain. However, I wasn't a mite in doubt about it soon arter I struck the water, 'cos in less'n a holy minit from that time I was convinced that I had struck a hull school of 'em."

"A what?"

"A shoal of 'em; a school o' mermaids, mebbly. I couldn't exactly count 'em jest then, but I'll take my oath that there were more than six or seven of 'em right around me, and they was a-swimmin' and a-divin' jest like so many porpusses; an' they was all spangled and rigged out jest like that air one wot came into my cabin arter the cask o' wine.

"Well, sir, one of 'em grabbed one of my feet, and another grabbed another foot, and they got all around me, an' I'll take my oath that they was covered with phosphorus or suthin' like it to make 'em shine, for you'd ha' thought that there was a dynamo or suthin' like it down there, and that the hull outfit war connected with it by wires.

"Fur jest about a minit I tried to fight 'em off, an' then I seed it warn't any sort o' use, so I gives up an' let them do with me as they pleased, an' the result was that they clustered around me, larfin' to beat the band, one of 'em on one side and another on t'other side, an' two more abaft at my caudle fins, an' two more ahead, like pilot fishes steerin' a bloomin' shark to its prey; an' there I was, not knowin' any more'n the Ancient Mariner did where I was headed fur."

"You weren't under the water all this time, were you?" asked Nick, trying hard not to laugh outright.

"No, I warn't," replied the captain, suspiciously. "I ain't no fish. Once I made fur to sing out, thinkin' that the watch aboard the *Phryne* would hear me, but one o' them mermaid women put her fingers to her lips to signify that silence war the rule, and at the same time she showed me one o' them doggoned pistols shinin' through the water, and I kept still.

"Well, sir, believe me 'r not, we swam around in this way fur about a quarter of an hour, when suddenly a long boat, like sich as a whaler uses, loomed up alongside of us, an' I war dragged aboard of it quicker'n you could say 'Scat.'

"An' that ain't all, either. There war more of them air gals aboard that boat, and I had one glimpse of 'em afore they spliced a bit o' sail over my peepers so's I couldn't see no more.

"One of 'em told me to keep still an' I wouldn't be hurt, and then I could feel that the boat was bein' pulled somewhere.

"Purty soon they stopped; then they h'isted me outen the boat, an' I war passed from hand to hand till I was let down into suthin'; an' then my hands war placed onto some sort of a ship's rigg'in' like a rope ladder, an' I was told to go below—which I did.

"Say, that war the funniest goin' below I ever tried, fur I felt all the time jest as if I were aboard of a small boat in a gale o' wind the way the thing bobbed around. Once I made shift to reach out, thinkin' that I could touch the bulkhead somewhere and so get an ijee of my

whereabouts, but I got a clip across the knuckles which made me satisfied to cling to the riggin'.

"I can't tell you how far down we went in this way, but it was some considerable distance before we touched solid deck ag'in; an' it wasn't any too solid at that.

"I'm a-watchin' you, Cap'n Carter, jest to see if you're believin' all I'm a-tellin' you, an' I kin see that it's purty hard to swalley. All the same, it's true."

"Go ahead, captain."

"Well, sir, we took a walk arter that, and a long walk, too. It was sort of uphill all the way, and was slimy and soft under foot as if we were steppin' in mud most of the way; and arter a while we comes to another ladder an' I war told to climb—which I did.

"I should say that 't war about the distance from the main deck to the crosstrees of an ordinary ship, where I climbed up, an' arter we had come out into a sort of cabin, a chair was shoved under me an' I war told to sit down.

"I could hear a lot of giggling and a-larfin' around me fur some time arter that, fur all the world as if a gals' boardin' school had broken loose; an' there was a rustlin' of things like women's apparel around me, too; and then, of a suddin, the bandage was taken from my eyes and I'm blest if I didn't find myself in the doggondest place that ever a mortal man has visited since the days of Aladdin's lamp.

"Now, you hear me, mister, an' don't you dare to say I'm a liar. Did you ever read about the feller they call Monte Cristo? And about the cavern he had on an island, somewhere? Well, I was in a cavern jest like that one. There were rocks all around me, with little port an' starboard lights—that is to say, little red and green lights—stuck into the cracks; an' there war rugs a foot thick scattered over the floor; an' there war couches an' chairs an' a lot o' sich things everywhere around me, an' larst, but not least, so help me, I war in the presence of thirteen female women. Now, what d'ye think of that? Hey?"

"I should have thought it rather astonishing," replied the detective.

"Astonishin'! Huh!"

"What did they look like, captain?"

"They looked jest like any other women might look, dressed out to kill, with black half masks over their bloomin' faces, and all a-gigglin' an' a-larfin' at the same time.

"One of 'em—an' I knowed it war the one who had visited me in my own cabin—said as how I war the honored guest of the occasion, an' they would have a glass o' grog in my honor. I noticed then that they had the cask o' wine they had taken from the *Phryne*, jacked up like a keg o' beer, an' they broached it an' passed around the lickier for fair.

"They had a pianer in the cavern, an' arter a little, one of 'em went to it, an' arter that there was playin' and

singin' to beat a symphony orchestra; an' all the while they kept a-fillin' that air glass o' mine an' a-holdin' it under my old nose.

"Well, sir, I don't remember much arter that. I woke up arter a while—I suppose it must ha' been hours arterward—an' I war stretched on my bunk in my own berth with the steward an' the mate a-standin' over me.

"I'd ha' thought it war all a blessed dream if it warn't fur the fact that the steward an' the mate both swear that I war brought alongside in a long boat an' h'isted on deck with tackle; the people as brought me sayin' as how I'd got drunk ashore.

"That's my yarn, an' I'll fight the lubber as dares to say I'm a liar."

CHAPTER III.

THE QUEEN OF THE SIRENS.

The detective looked at the inspector, and the inspector looked at the detective.

To have laughed at that moment would have been fatal, for the captain was shifting his eyes from one to the other of them in an angry stare, prepared to explode with wrath at the first sign of unbelief that he discovered.

With heroic effort both the inspector and the detective preserved an appearance of becoming gravity; and, after a moment, the detective said:

"Captain, how do you account for this wonderful experience?"

"I don't account for it. I can't. I'm glad you take it serious, for most people don't."

"I would li'e to ask you some questions about it, captain."

"Ask me anything you like, sir."

"All right; but I wish to impress you with the fact that if some of my questions seem offensive, or suggest that I have not believed your story, you must overlook them, for I only wish to get at the whole truth."

"Heave ahead, sir. I reckon I can stand all you'll send, now that I know that you don't put me down as a cussed liar."

"You say that the people who returned you to the *Phryne* reported that you had got drunk while ashore?"

"Ay, ay."

"Were those people men or women?"

"The steward and the mate said as how they were women."

"So that bears out your tale, doesn't it?"

"Ay, ay."

"Did the steward or the mate question them?"

"They didn't have no time to do it. As soon as I was h'isted aboard the *Phryne*, they pulled away in the dark an' disappeared."

"What time was it when you woke up to consciousness?"

"About seven bells—that is, about half-past three in the morning."

"And how long had you been back in your own cabin at that time?"

"Half an hour, the mate said."

"So you were returned to your own ship about three o'clock."

"Some'eres thereabouts."

"When you went overboard, you say that you were dressed in shirt, trousers and slippers. Now, when you woke up, was your clothing wet?"

"Well, 't war moist; but, you see, I had other togs on over the old ones. The gals had rigged me out from main truck to kelson in the uniform of a captain of the navy. They had put the togs on over my wet clothes, an' the mate said as how he didn't know me from Adam when he first seed me over the side, in the long boat. I had the hull outfit, from the cap to the spats over my shoes."

"And what about that cask of wine? Had it really disappeared from the pantry?"

"It had."

"And did the steward and the third mate remember the fact that they had heaved it overboard at your order?"

"They did; and they do."

"What did they have to say about it?"

"Well, it's their private opinion—although neither of them dares to put it in words, fur they both know mighty well that I'd trice 'em up for it if they did—but, all the same, it's their private opinion that the hull thing war a leetle game that I had fixed up with some of them air gals, to send the cask ashore somewhere, and then to go there an' git drunk. You know neither of 'em seed any woman come aboard the *Phryne* afore I gave the order about the cask. The hull thing makes me out a bloomin' liar, whichever way I head, so about all that I can do is to luff up and ride out the gale, head on. That's my way o' puttin' it, but it about explains the sitooation."

"How does it happen that only the steward and the third mate are cognizant of all this affair?"

"'Cos the steward and the third mate comes mighty near to bein' all the crew I've got at the present time. I'm mighty short-handed. Most of my men deserted when we struck New York, an' I've been lyin' by waiting to sign on a new crew. There's the chief engineer an' one of his assistants aboard, but they were asleep at the time; an'——"

"I understand. You seemed to enjoy yourself while you were in the cabin of the mermaids, captain."

"Well, wouldn't you? There war thirteen purty girls——"

"Were they pretty, captain?"

"Cap'n Carter, if you kin jedge a woman by the way she stands on her two feet, by the way she carries her sails when she walks, by the cut of her figgerhead an' her manner o' comin' up into the wind, so to speak, by the red of her lips and the gleam of her white an' even teeth between 'em, by the sparklin' of her eyes through the holes of a mask which jest hides enough to make ye want to see more, by the archin' of her instep and the coils of hair atop of her head, by the music in her voice an' the sunshine in her manners, why, then, the hull thirteen war purty, an' don't you forgit it!"

"That is a very comprehensive answer. Were they also young?"

"If ye kin jedge that by the way they danced, and sang, and larfed, and swalleyed their red wine, they war more'n seven, an' less'n seventy."

"And I suppose you have told me all that you know about them; eh?"

"Every blessed thing."

"Did you hear any names used among them while you were in the cavern?"

"Lots of 'em. There was Rose, an' Cora, an' Jane, an' Pansy, an'——"

"Did you hear the name of the one who interrupted you when you were busy with your figures in your own cabin?"

"Ay, ay; she was the one they called Cora. She was the queen bee, too. When she sneezed, the hull ship's company coughed, so to speak."

"Now, about the cavern."

"Ay, ay."

"How big was it?"

"Well, I should say that it was thirty or forty feet, either way."

"What articles did you notice inside the cavern, save those you have already mentioned?"

"There was a lot of truck there that looked as if it had come off some ship, or ships; but, fur the most part, I think the plunder was stowed away some'eres else, 'cos there was a passage or two a-leadin' off from the room I was in."

"Have you any idea where the cavern is located?"

"Jest about as much as you have."

"But when you were hauled into the long boat from the water, couldn't you tell which direction the boat was headed after that?"

"No, sir. I had lost my bearin's, teetotally; but if I war to guess at it, I should say it war south'ard."

"About how much time elapsed after you were taken into the boat before you were lifted out of it and told to climb down the rope ladder?"

"I couldn't tell that, either. I was listenin' to the talk around me all the time; but I should say that it war some'eres near an hour."

"And the thing you were made to climb into; what was that like?"

"Well, it was damp and musty, and it rocked and tumbled around as I climbed down. I ain't got no idea about that part of it. It was a different sort of a craft from any that I ever shipped aboard of afore. All I know is that when I got to the bottom it warn't easy to breathe."

"And after that you walked a long distance through mud and slime, you say?"

"Yes; but I don't know how fur it was."

"And then you climbed up about the distance from a deck to a masthead of an ordinary ship?"

"Precisely."

"And found yourself in the cavern you have described?"

"Ay, ay; when they took the bandage from my eyes. You see they was some time about that, fur they all took time to put on different clothes afore they let me see 'em ag'in."

"You are sure, I suppose, that you were in a cavern surrounded by rocks, and not inside the hull of an old ship; eh?"

"Cap'n Carter, I've followed the sea, man an' boy, fur forty year, and I know a ship's hull when I sees one. That warn't no hull; it was a cavern, with the rocks a-stickin' out all over the place and with port and starboard lights all around. Now an' then there was a masthead light—a white one, you know—too; but, for the most part, they was red and green."

"Captain, that cavern was doubtless somewhere along the shore of Staten Island; eh?"

"Well, I about figgered it like that, sir."

"Have you seen or heard anything of your strange visitor since that night?"

Capt. Bob Staples did not immediately reply.

Instead, he turned his eyes, with a quizzical expression, toward the inspector, and it was not until Nick repeated the question that he answered at all.

"Well, sir," he said, then, "to tell you the truth, I have, although I have told the inspector differently. He asked me that question, and I said 'No,' but the truth is, I have."

"Tell me about it," said the detective. "When was it?"

"Night before last, Cap'n Carter."

"Where?"

"In the cabin of my ship."

"The same young woman?"

"Ay, ay."

"And did she appear just as suddenly and just as mysteriously?"

"Precisely."

"Tell me about it."

"There ain't much more to tell than that. I was settin' there doin' nothin' in perticlar, when I got a hail from behind the curtain where she hid the fust time she came

aboard—the time when she made me send out fur the steward, you remember?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was where she hailed me from."

"Did she have the gun with her this time?"

"Sure thing."

"And what did she want? Another cask of wine?"

"Nope. She just came to make a call; leastwise that is what she said about it, and seein' as how she didn't take nothin' away with her, I reckon she spoke the truth about it."

"Was she dressed the same?"

"Precisely."

"What did she have to say to you?"

"Well, the first I knowed that she was there, I got the hail.

"'Evenin', captin', says she; an' then she stepped out afore me, an' I could see by the stretchin' of her lips an' by the sparkle in her eyes that she was larfin. Say, Cap'n Carter, you arsked me a little while ago if she was purty, an' now I want to tell you suthin' about it. You see, I couldn't ketch a glimpse of any part of her face, 'ceptin' that part of it as shows under the mask, but I'll take my oath that there ain't a purtier woman this side of the angels that kin hold a candle to her.

"She had that flowin', robelike thing a-hangin' from her shoulders almost to her heels, jest like you see 'em in play actin'; an' a short skirt of sky-blue, all covered with spangles like I've seen the sun a-shinin' on icebergs that reflected the blue of the heavens; and mebbey they was long stockin's, 'r tights, 'r whatever you've a mind to call 'em under the skirt, and they was blue, too, and likewise covered with the spangles; and there was a crownlike thing, set with gems, around her temples and agin' her hair—black hair it was, too—and a short jacket, like Spanish bullfighters wear; and she stood there fur all the world es if she had jest stepped down outen a picture. I jest ketched my breath, and waited; that's wot I done."

CHAPTER IV.

THE DETECTIVE'S BOLD DECISION.

"Arter I'd waited a minit 'r so," continued the captain, "she took a step 'r two toward me, an' she says to me, says she, 'Can I come in, cap'n?' says she, jest like silver bells a-chimin' away off in the distance; an' I says to her, 'It strikes me kinder es if you war in already, ain't ye?' says I.

"Then she larfed, and she seated herself agin' the arm of the chair, same as she'd done afore, if you'll remember, and she says:

"'Did you have a head on ye when ye woke up the next mornin' arter our spree?' says she.

"'I did,' says I; an' then I arsked her wot it was that

she put into that grog, 'cos I knowed that no straight-out Madeira wine that was ever made would ha' served me like that.

"Oh," says she, 'we jest wanted to have a little lark with you, and when you dived overboard arter us we had to do something with you, and so we took you to the tunnel.'"

"Wait," said the detective. "Did she make use of that word, 'tunnel'?"

"Ay, ay; for sure."

"Go ahead, captain. What happened next?"

"Well," says I to her, 'that was all very nice of you to take me out and give me sich a rousin' good time 'thout any expense on my part, but it was kind o' low-down mean to up an' put drugs into my licker so's I couldn't say "Good-night" to ye when I came away.'

"She shrugged her shoulders; an' then, changin' the subject, she says:

"Cap'n, I've heer'd es how you've been to the inspector in New York an' told him all about that leetle affair of ours. Is that so?"

"Precisely," says I.

"What did you do that fur?" says she.

"Bekuz I war arsked," says I.

"I s'pose he thought that you was a bloomin' old liar," says she, at that; leastwise, them ain't the precise words she used, but they had that meanin' all the same; an' I said that she was dead right about it; and you ought to have heard her larf.

"What did you come here fur this time?" says I. "An-other one o' them air casks?"

"Yes," says she! 'but I'm goin' to arsk you to give it to me this time. I shan't make ye go fur to call the steward an' the mate to help ye with it, but I'll jest leave it to your own good nature; an'," says she, 'if you do want to give me another cask of it, in remembrance of your spree the other night, ye kin jest heave it overboard yerself arter I've gone, an' nobody but you an' me need know a word about it. What d'ye say, cap'n?"

"Well, sir, what could I say? I jest turned it over in my mind for a minit 'r two an' then I says to her, says I, 'Miss Scylla,' says I——

"Hello, there," says she, 'where did you git that name?"

"From the inspector," says I; and then you should have heard her larf.

"I'll tell you wot I'll do, Miss Cora," says I, 'if you like that air name better'n the other one; an' I saw her lips twitch in a half smile.

"Wot'll you do?" says she.

"If you like that air wine so well," says I, 'I'll put two of them casks overboard fur you an' your young lady friends, instead o' one; only I want you to know that I'm half owner in the *Phryne*, an' that them casks o' wine is mine to give away as I see fit. I shipped 'em

as a private venture of my own,' says I, 'an' if you want a couple of 'em, why, you shall have 'em—but on one condition,' says I.

"Wot's the condition?" says she.

"That arter you git 'em, an' have 'em all stowed away in your cavern, you'll come arter me some night an' take me there ag'in fur another spree like the last one. I had such a good time," says I, 'that I'd like to play a repeater,' I says to her.

"At that she larfed. Then she seemed to think it over; an' bimeby she says, says she:

"Mebby so."

"Is it a go?" says I.

"Mebby so," says she, ag'in. 'I'll think about it.'

"Decide now," says I, 'an' in less'n no time arter you're gone, overboard goes two casks of that air wine.'

"Well, sir, she throwed back her head and larfed and larfed; an' then all of a sudden she stopped in the midst of it an' arsked:

"Which one of us be you in love with, cap'n?"

"You!" says I, bold as the devil; an' that time I thought she'd have hy-steer-icks fur sure; but she ketched herself, an' she says, says she:

"It's a bargain, cap'n."

"Precisely," says I. 'When'll you come arter me?"

"Oh, in a day 'r two, 'r three," says she.

"Wot's the matter with to-night?" says I.

"Can't be did," says she.

"Then wot's the matter with to-morrer night?" says I.

"That'll do," says she."

"Then you are expecting to see her again this very night," said the detective.

"I be," was the quiet rejoinder.

"That is splendid!" exclaimed Nick. "I'll go aboard with you when you return to your ship, and——"

"Wot's that?"

"I was saying that I would go back with you when you return——"

"You'll excuse me, Cap'n Carter, but I'm hanged if you will!"

"Eh? You don't want me?"

"Not by a long sight, sir. Say, wot d'ye take me fur, anyway? D'ye think that I'm goin' to make a date with a young woman an' then up an' give her away like that? I ain't built in jest that air way, sir, I ain't. I'll come around an' tell you all about the affair to-morrer, if she shows up an' keeps her engagement, but I ain't a-goin' to help no perlice officers to git on that young woman's track, not if I can help it, an' I think I can. She ain't done me no larstin' harm as I knows on, an' she's mighty welcome to the wine, which I chucked overboard accordin' to agreement. No, sirree! I'm a-goin' to send my steward, and the mate, and the chief engineer and his assistant, and every son of a sea cook aboard my ship—I'm a-goin' to send the hull b'ilin' of 'em ashore to-night

when I git back to the *Phryne*, and I'm a-goin' to keep watch alone, fur the comin' of that air gal, and if any landlubber, 'r perlice officer, 'r any other person comes within rifle shot of that air ship without first havin' permission, he'll git a bullet into him as sure as my name is Staples, and don't you forgit it!"

"But, captain, she is a sea robber—a pirate—a thief."

"I don't care if she's the devil himself, which ain't likely, seein' as how she's a woman; it's all one to me. I ain't goin' to take no part in her undoin'; you hear me!"

"All right," said Nick. "We will drop that part of it. It was very kind of you to come here and tell us all you have told."

"Well, I had agreed to come here to-day to meet you, an' tell you all about it, an' I'm a man as always lives up to my agreements, so here I be; but I reckon as how my contract is about filled now, an' if you don't mind, I'll be goin'."

"Did you make any especial arrangements with her about to-night?" asked Nick, tentatively.

"Nothin' more'n that I agreed to do precisely as I done afore."

"You mean about diving into the water? Eh?"

"Well, she allowed that that warn't necessary this time, seein' as how I was to send all my men ashore an' would be on the *Phryne* all alone."

"How is it going to be managed this time?"

"Why, she said that they'd row up alongside in their boat and hail me, and when I answered an' said that all was clear aboard the *Phryne*, two on 'em would come aboard and bind up my eyes, so's I couldn't see, and then they'd take me away. See?"

"Yes," replied the detective, thoughtfully. "I see. It will be quite an experience, won't it, captain?"

"You betcher life."

"You will have something to tell the next time I see you."

"Mebby so, if we do see each other ag'in; and I think I orter tell. It depends——"

The detective looked at his watch and then started to his feet in pretended consternation.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "You have been so interesting, captain, that you made me forget something that I had to attend to. Will you wait here just a minute before you go? I won't be absent more than five or ten minutes at the most—and it is only half-past two o'clock now."

"I don't know as I have got anything more to wait fur, Cap'n Carter; but howsumever——"

"Oh, yes, wait. I won't be long."

"All right. But understand that you ain't goin' to coddle me into takin' you aboard the *Phryne* with me. I wouldn't do that fur a thousand dollars, nohow."

"Oh, I won't ask you again to do that. I know how

you feel about it. You will wait here for me, won't you?"

"Yes; if you ain't gone too long a time."

There was no opportunity for Nick to cast more than one quick, but meaning, glance at the inspector, but the latter readily understood from the detective's manner that Nick had some idea up his sleeve which he was on the point of putting into execution.

And as a matter of fact, the detective went no further than the outer office, where he seated himself at a desk and wrote rapidly for several moments.

When he had completed what he had to say, he placed the message in an envelope and sealed it, after which he addressed it to the inspector, marked it important and called to one of the regular office men to carry it inside.

And this is what the inspector read when he opened the letter:

"It is plain that Staples won't permit anybody to remain aboard the *Phryne* with him to-night, and so Staples must be detained somehow, while I take his place and represent him in that interesting episode which is likely to occur, for I tell you truthfully that as impossible and unreal as the whole story sounds, I believe it—that is, the greater part of it. I am convinced that the captain is thoroughly in earnest in all he says.

"I have taken his measure so thoroughly that I am convinced that I can make up sufficiently like him to carry out the part, but the important thing is that I do not wish him ever to have an idea that I was instrumental in detaining him. You see, therefore, that you must take the onus of this thing on your own shoulders—if you are willing to do it.

"My scheme is this: Keep him there with you half an hour or more, and at the end of that time I will send in another note which you can show to him after you read it. I will say in the note that I am called away on an important matter and cannot return to your office just now, and I will ask you to apologize to the captain for me, for keeping him waiting; and in the meantime you will have fixed up some scheme by which he can be detained ashore until to-morrow morning. I know that I can trust you to do that.

"He must not be permitted to return to his ship; and when you have arranged things so that he cannot do so, please telephone to me at my house. I will be awaiting the message.

"Then, to-night, when Scylla the Siren calls for him aboard his ship, she will find that she has me to entertain, instead of Capt. Staples, although I do not intend that she will be made aware of that interesting fact until after I have been introduced into that wondrous cavern, and have made the acquaintance of her twelve interesting friends."

Nick did not await a reply from the inspector after

sending the note in to him, but left headquarters at once, returning immediately to his own home, where, after writing the second note that he had agreed to send to the inspector, he busied himself with his preparations for the adventures of the coming night.

He realized that it was no small thing that he had undertaken to do, for he was thoroughly aware that a woman who was smart enough and fearless enough to act the part of Scylla the Siren would be a difficult person to deceive.

But the game was thoroughly worth the candle, and he was determined to carry it through.

And so he proceeded with his preparations as calmly as if he were not actually taking his life in his hands and literally putting his head into the lion's jaws.

CHAPTER V.

THE START OF A DESPERATE ADVENTURE.

The detective had perhaps never before in his life undertaken a disguise that was so difficult as this one.

In build, the captain was rather squat and thickset; his complexion had been tanned to a reddish brown and the skin on his face and hands resembled sole leather, more than anything else—and sole leather that had somehow been seamed and fluted into furrows and frills, not unlike the waves of the ocean where he had passed the greater part of his life.

A heavy shock of iron-gray hair, worn in unkempt profusion upon a massive head, and whiskers of the same hue, worn underneath his chin, while the face itself was clean shaven, made up his general appearance.

His brawny hands were knotted and seamed with use, and his arms suggested the capstan bars which were a part and parcel with his early training.

When it is asserted that the detective passed the entire day that remained to him in his preparation of this disguise, the reader can readily understand how difficult he found it; he who, as a rule, found half an hour sufficient time for the most complicated of his make-ups.

But when the disguise was completed, and Nick Carter looked in the mirror at himself after having put on the finishing touches, he was satisfied.

Not only had he been successful in producing an exact representation of the captain, but he had done it so thoroughly that he believed that he could even dive into the water if necessary, without in any way interfering with the make-up.

In a word, he had made use of a new preparation of pigment that he had lately invented, which was waterproof; it was, in a sense, not unlike varnish, and he had only to apply it after the general make-up had been put on, to render it impervious, at least for a time, to the action of water.

The wig and the whiskers were fastened on in the same

manner, and the detective had no fear but that he could face the world defying anybody to penetrate the fact that he was wearing a make-up at all.

It was just at the moment when the disguise was complete that his telephone rang, and, replying to it, he discovered that the inspector was at the other end of the wire.

"Well," said Nick. "What luck?"

"When I left the captain half an hour ago at my own house," replied the inspector, "he was snoring to beat the fog horn off Hatteras. He is blissfully unconscious that he has been detained, and to-morrow, when he wakes up, he will find nobody to blame but himself."

"Are you sure that he won't wake up before to-morrow?" asked the detective.

"Absolutely positive."

"Then I can go ahead with my plans, eh?"

"I don't know any reason why you cannot do so."

"Where are you now?"

"At the office."

"Will you remain there till I come down?"

"Sure. And, say——"

"Well?"

"That steward he talked to us about is here."

"Eh? Is that so? Where is he?"

"In the reception room. He has asked for the captain half a dozen times, and seems to be worried about him. Shall I send him away, or keep him?"

"Keep him, by all means. I will be there inside half an hour. What have you said to the steward about the captain?"

"Why, without exactly saying so, I have managed to give him the idea that the old chap has taken a little too much and has been sleeping it off in my office. I told him that I would let the captain know, as soon as I could, that his steward was waiting for him."

"Good. Do you know the steward's name?"

"Sure. The captain calls him Pete; and, by the way, Pete says that the mate, whose name is Corker, is waiting for them at the Bishop's Tavern, down on the corner."

"Good again! It could not be better. I'll be there as soon as I can get there, now. I will come in by the back entrance and go directly to your private door. Leave it on the latch for me, will you? I might have to step through that door mighty quick."

"All right."

The detective lost no time in leaving his house after that, and in the course of less than half an hour he stepped into the inspector's private office.

"Well, by Jove!" exclaimed the inspector, when he saw him. "Say, Nick, if it were not for the fact that I know the captain to be safely at my own house I'm blowed if you wouldn't have fooled even me. How did you manage to copy the clothes so well?"

"I studied everything about the old chap with great

care before I left this office," replied Nick; "and I remembered that I happened to have an old suit among my disguises that was almost precisely like the one the captain wore. Only I had nothing to match the huge watch-chain, and——"

"And the seal ring, eh? Well, I thought of them both, and I took the liberty of borrowing them for the occasion. Here they are."

"With these in my possession," said the detective, "I think the disguise is about as complete as it can be made."

"You are right, it is. There is only one real danger now."

"What is that?"

"You might say or do something, or leave something unsaid or undone, in the presence of Pete and Corker, to betray you."

"I have thought of that. I will pretend to be just stupid full, you know. I think I can get around all the difficulties in that way."

"Sure thing. Say, Nick, do you take full stock in that yarn of the captain's?"

"Yes; pretty nearly so. I think that he told what he honestly believed to be the whole truth."

"Then I wish you would tell me how you account for it all."

"For all of what?"

"That yarn. The cavern in the rocks, which must be out somewhere in the middle of the bay. The girls in the 'Black Crook' costumes, and all that. Eh?"

"You think it is rather fishy, do you?"

"I certainly do."

"Well, suppose we begin at the cavern?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember that once he referred to it as the tunnel? Or rather that he quoted the woman as having done so?"

"Yes."

"Don't you also remember that, somewhere in the early eighties, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad began the building of a huge tunnel from the mainland to Staten Island, with the intention of making the grand terminal of their railway on the island?"

"Yes, I do."

"I was a youngster at that time, but I remember visiting the work on that tunnel once in company with my father, and that I was greatly interested in it. Just why the work was ultimately abandoned I do not know, but I do know that a great deal of it was accomplished before the project was finally given up."

"Do you mean——"

"Wait; I will tell you what I mean."

"Go ahead."

"Engineers did not know as much about caissons and that sort of work in those days as they do now, and I suppose the undertaking was abandoned because it was

found to be next to impossible of practical completion. At all events it was abandoned."

"Well."

"When it was decided to give it up, as much as possible of what had been already done was destroyed."

"I see."

"Much of the tunnel was filled up—but I do not think that all of it was filled."

"Humph! I begin to understand."

"Now, when I visited that tunnel, I remember that there was one place, some distance back from the shore of the kill where the contractors encountered a pocket of sand which they had to dig out in entirety, and the result was that, when it was removed, a huge chamber was left, almost in the middle of a solid mass of rocks."

"And you believe that chamber to be the cavern described by the old man?"

"I am almost certain of it."

"And you know where to find it?"

"Ah! There is where you have me, for that is just what I do not know."

"But——"

"I know approximately where it is located, but how to find it is quite another matter."

"How so?"

"Because, as I have already told you, a great part of the old tunnel was filled in. All the approaches to it were concealed. Indeed, it was supposed by everybody that the whole thing had been filled up, else the price of property would have depreciated right around that point, for nobody wishes to live over an abandoned tunnel."

"That is right, too."

"But you and I both know that a lot of contractors would not be too particular about carrying out such a contract. If they could fill such a place sufficiently so that nobody would ever find out that less than half of the real work had been done, that would be exactly the method they would use, thereby saving many thousand dollars and rendering their profits accordingly larger; don't you see?"

"Sure."

"Well, the captain's story has convinced me that there is a great deal of that tunnel which was never filled up; that the chamber in the rocks which I have described is the cavern of the captain's story; that these sea robbers have somehow found their way to it, and that they have managed to create another means of entrance from the water."

"Now, Steve, I don't know how to get to that place without blasting through a lot of rock, which would consume months in knocking them to pieces; but there is one entrance at least, and without doubt there is more than one. I don't know how to get into the place, but I'll bet that once I am inside of it I will know how to get out."

"And that is why you propose to let the women take you there and——"

"Precisely, as the captain would say."

"Nick, do you believe that part of the story? About the women, I mean? Do you believe that they are all women?"

"The old captain looks to me like a man who knows a woman when he sees one," said the detective, with a smile.

"Yes; but it seems preposterous that a lot of women could conceive and carry out such a scheme as this one."

"Women are doing a lot of things lately, Steve. They are making lawyers, doctors, ministers and detectives of themselves, and I don't see why they should not undertake the profession of expert sea robbers as well, do you?"

"N-no; I guess not."

"Women never do things by halves. A woman goes the whole hog or none. If one is brave, she is braver than the bravest. However, there is no use in that sort of argument at the present moment."

"No."

"The point is that I am satisfied that the captain's story is, in the main, true; that I think I know, approximately, at least, where the mysterious cavern he tells about is located; that the captain had an engagement with Scylla the Siren for to-night, and that now I am prepared to keep that engagement in his place."

"I wish I might go with you, Nick."

"So do I; but this is an adventure which I must undertake alone, or not at all, so send out for the steward and I'll begin."

CHAPTER VI.

SCYLLA, THE BEAUTIFUL.

The inspector went to the outer room and presently returned with the steward, and at a glance the detective saw that he would have little or no difficulty in imposing upon this man, who had himself, during the time he was waiting for his master, looked into the bottom of more than one glass of grog.

He saluted awkwardly when he entered the room, and stood waiting for the man, whom he supposed to be his captain, to speak.

"Throw me a heavin' line, there, you lubber!" roared Nick, rising from the chair in which he had been stretched almost at full length, and lurching toward the steward as if nothing could save him from falling. "Give me your flipper. This is a rough sea, and a choppy one at that, Pete."

He placed one hand solemnly on the shoulder of the steward, and allowed himself to be led through the door, without so much as deigning a backward glance at the inspector, who stood near his own desk, smiling broadly.

Nick accompanied the steward out of the building and along the street toward the tavern that the inspector had indicated; but at the entrance to it he paused, and, clinging fast to the railing that led to the stairs, he exclaimed: "Avast, there, Pete. Can't you see that I've got to put a reef in this 'ere sail o' mine afore I da'st to come about on the other tack? Pipe the mate up from below an' we'll be headin' away fur the *Phryne*. There's grog enough in my own cabin fur all I'll want more to-night."

He clung to the rail while Pete descended the stairs, presently reappearing, accompanied by a low-browed, fierce-looking sailor of the old-fashioned type, who pulled his forelock respectfully when he encountered his captain—or, the man whom he thought to be his captain.

"Mr. Corker, you're drunk," said Nick, thickly, still clinging to the rail.

"Ay, ay, sir; an' by the same token, so are you, sir," was the reply.

Nick pretended to think the answer funny, for he chuckled audibly; and after a moment he said:

"Pete, you take the wheel an' be skipper for a leetle while. This head sea is a leetle too much for my old eyes, an' I don't know my bearin's among all these new lights. Haul a leetle mite more into the wind, Pete, 'r by the Lord Harry we'll ship a sea that'll carry me overboard in the wash. That's right. Warp up alongside an' throw out your grapplin' hooks, 'r I'll swamp right alongside o' ye afore I know it. Phwhew! but that air grog wot them perlice fellers throw into ye is strong, all right."

"Avast, there!" he added, when a few moments later Pete sought to signal to a car. "I ain't goin' aboard no craft o' that kind in this gale, an' don't you forgit it. Sing out to one o' them air two-wheeled dories with the ports in the bows instead of on the beams, so's we kin see where we're goin'."

A hansom was called and the three piled into it together, after Pete had given directions that they be taken to Pier A, North River, which is near Castle Garden.

When they left the cab it was at once apparent to Pete and the mate that the motion of the vehicle had lulled their master to sleep, for it was as much as their united efforts could accomplish to waken him and afterward to lead him to the boat.

But they finally succeeded in tumbling him into the stern in any old way, and then the two men manned the oars and presently they shot out upon the waters of the bay, headed toward the *Phryne*.

Nick observed, through his half-closed lids, that although the two men had been drinking deeply, they were well able to row the boat, and so he permitted it to appear that he was sleeping peacefully, and he did not rouse himself until they were alongside their own ship.

Here, he managed to render it no easy matter for them to sling him aboard the vessel, after which they conducted him to his cabin, where he flung himself into a

chair, and ordered Pete to bring him a bottle of grog instantly, on pain of being hurled into the sea if he was too long about it.

Then, while he poured out a tumbler brimming full of the liquor, he blurted out:

"Didn't I tell you lubbers that you could all have a night ashore to-night, Pete? I have forgotten whether I said to-night, 'r some other night."

"Ay, ay, sir. You said to-night."

"Well, then, why don't you go? Hey?"

"I thought——"

"Git out o' here, the hull b'ilin' lot of ye!"

"Are we to go, sir? All of us?"

"Every mother's son of you! Git out. What time is it?"

"Six bells, sir."

"Well, you can all have till seven bells o' the mornin' watch. That'll be half-past seven o'clock ashore, where they don't strike no bells, so you look out fur it Pete. If ye ain't aboard here afore eight bells——"

"We'll be here, sir."

"Then git out. I can manage the old ship to-night myself; an' besides, I'm expectin' company."

"Ay, ay, sir; that's what you said. Mebby you'd like to have me here to wait on ye."

For reply Nick reached forward and seized a book from the table which he hurled at the steward's head, and that worthy, with a broad grin on his face, fled through the companion way to the deck.

Nick rose from his chair and followed far enough to hear what was said between the steward and the mate.

"He ain't as bad as usual," said Pete, to his companion. "He'll be all right, and he does remember wot he said about our goin' ashore fur the night."

"Then we kin cast off at oncet, eh?" said the mate.

"Sure. Call the others, and we'll be gone afore he changes his mind."

They lost no time after that, and before it was fairly dark, the detective had the satisfaction of knowing that he was entirely alone aboard the *Phryne*.

It was with a feeling of intense satisfaction that he returned to the cabin, then, prepared to await with patience the coming of Scylla the Siren.

It was not yet eight o'clock in the evening, and he knew that there was little likelihood that the female sea robber would put in an appearance much before midnight; nor did he have a doubt but that the vessel had been watched by one of her crew throughout the afternoon and evening, in order to make it positive that the old sea dog had not laid a trap for his expected visitors.

The masthead and anchor lights had been put out by the mate before he left the vessel. There was literally nothing for the detective to do save to eat the lunch which the steward had been thoughtful enough to prepare for him before taking his departure, so having done

that, he made himself comfortable in the cabin, and having discovered a book that he had not seen before, he soon forgot the flight of time in reading.

And thus the hours passed, one after another.

Twice he went on deck and looked off over the waters of the bay, but he saw nothing there to interest him particularly, and believing that the playing of his part consisted in his remaining in the cabin until he was hailed, he gave himself up to the enjoyment of the book.

There was nobody left aboard the ship to strike the bells and thus to warn him of the flight of time, and midnight came before he was aware of it.

It had just occurred to him that the hour must be getting late, and that it was almost time to expect his callers, when he was startled so that he almost leaped to his feet by the sound of a voice which spoke softly to him, almost directly into his ear—and it was the voice of a woman; there was no mistaking that fact.

"Good-evening, captain," it said; and as the detective started and half turned, he found that the captain's description of the incidents had been quite true.

A woman, apparently young, and undoubtedly beautiful beneath the half mask she wore, stood before him, near the curtain that hung between the cabin and the companion way which led to the berths abaft of it.

And her costume? The captain had but faintly described it, or she had gotten herself up with unusual care for the occasion.

Her jet-black hair and clear, white brow were partly concealed by a crown-shaped headdress that was studded with jewels. A half mask concealed the upper part of her face to the tip of her nose, but below it he could see that the chin was perfect in mold and contour, that her lips were red and smiling, and that her teeth were wonderfully white and even.

A jacket, shaped like the bullfighter's jacket, of Spain, enveloped her shoulders and bust. It was fastened together at the bottom, was sea-blue in color and literally blazed with gems.

Below this, to her knees, hung a skirt of the same color and texture; and this also was ablaze with decorations—the captain had described them as spangles, but Nick perceived that the effect was produced by cleverly interwoven strips of mica, which reflected every glint of light that touched them.

Below the skirt the shapely limbs of the young woman were encased in stockings, or tights, whereof the general color effect was blue, as in the case of the other garments, but here, again, a glistening, scalelike effect had been accomplished by the use of mica, until, as she stood there before him in the glare of the cabin lights, she seemed literally to be on fire, while the smile on her lips and the glow of her dark eyes through the holes in the mask, produced an effect on the detective which he never quite forgot as long as he lived.

The long, narrow cape—the captain had called it a robe—of thin, gauzy substance, which clung to her shoulders at the back, she had caught up in her left hand, and she did appear, as the captain had said, as if she had stepped down out of a mediæval painting.

"Blast my eyes!" exclaimed Nick, in well-simulated imitation of the captain's voice and manner, as well as language, "if you don't beat all the way you appear before a feller so suddin. Say, miss, it war a-gittin' so bloomin' late that I had begun to fear that you warn't goin' to hail."

The woman laughed lightly, and half seated herself gingerly against the arm of a chair near her, throwing one foot carelessly across it.

"Tell me about your visit to New York to-day," she said, lightly; but Nick could see that her lips had tightened over her teeth, and that she was very much in earnest in asking the question.

"What about it?" he asked.

"You were a long time at police headquarters, weren't you?" she asked.

"Yes; some considerable time."

"And what did you find to talk about during all that time?"

"Mostly about you," replied the detective, boldly, for he saw that the movements of the captain had been spied upon, and he realized that it would not do to carry his attempts at deception too far lest she suspect something.

"I suppose that much," she said, slowly. "Now, if you please, I will hear what you—and the men who were with you—had to say about me."

"Well, I s'pose I done most of the talkin'."

"I suppose you did. And you had two good listeners, did you not?"

"Yep. They war purty good, considerin'."

"Considering what?"

"Considerin' that I didn't go there intendin' to tell 'em any more than I wanted to."

"Did you, for instance, tell them about your engagement for to-night?"

"Well, I ain't quite such a jack as all that, miss."

"Did the inspector and Nick Carter believe all that you did tell them about me, or did they think that you were lying?"

"The inspector and—who?"

"Nick Carter."

"Was that the other feller's name?"

"Yes; weren't you introduced?"

"Sure; but I don't think I caught the name; leastwise, I didn't remember it."

"Well, the other man was Nick Carter. The great Nick Carter. Have you never heard of him?"

"Can't say as I have, miss."

"You certainly are behind the times. Nick Carter

would feel greatly offended if he supposed that you had never heard of him."

"Well, he'd have to git over it, then, for I ain't never heard about him, as I knows on."

"Did those two men believe all that you told them about me?" she repeated.

"To tell ye th' truth, I don't think they did," replied Nick, leering at her in a confidential smile that was inimitable.

"Nick Carter left you there for some time alone with the inspector, didn't he?" was her next question.

"Yes; he was called away or suthin'; I don't know what it was."

"And a little while after that you went out with the inspector and entered a carriage."

The detective was startled by this question, for he felt that it might portend that the inspector and the captain had been shadowed from headquarters, and that it was known to the woman before him that the captain was at that very moment drugged and asleep at the house of the inspector, while the man to whom she was talking was a fraud.

However, he determined to play the game out to the end, no matter what happened; and so, to her last question, he nonchalantly replied.

"Sure."

"Where did you go in the carriage?" she asked.

"To the inspector's house."

"What for?"

"Bekus he arsked me to."

"Why?"

"Said as how he had some new kind of grog up there that he wanted to blow me to."

"And I suppose he did 'blow' you, and that you drank a lot of it; eh?"

"I believe as how I tucked away my share, miss."

"And got yourself drunk, eh?"

"Precisely."

"And talked a whole lot more after that. It was then, I suppose, that you gave away the whole thing about what you thought of doing to-night, was it not?"

"Say, miss, I ain't no liar, whatever else you've a mind to call me. Jest now I said that I ain't told nobody about that leetle date of ourn, an' I meant wot I said, so help me."

"Well, what did the inspector want with you? You can take my word for it that he did not take you to his house for nothing. He isn't built that way. What's more, the other one—Nick Carter—didn't leave you alone with him without having some game in his mind that he wanted played on you, or wanted to play on you himself. Now, what was it all?"

"Miss Cora, s'help me, you kin search me from main truck to kelson. I give it up."

"How long were you at the house of the inspector?"

"I'll be blowed if I know. It was quite a while, but there warn't nobody strikin' bells up in that locality and I didn't keep no account of the time."

"You mean that you were too drunk to remember, don't you?"

"Not by a jugful, I don't; but these 'ere questions o' yourn bother me, an'——"

"Possibly I will bother you more than you think before we part to-night," she interrupted him, meaningly.

CHAPTER VII.

NICK CARTER'S STRANGEST EXPERIENCE.

The detective began to experience an uneasy sensation before the searching gaze of those black eyes which bored into him through the holes in the half mask, and the still more searching questions the woman asked.

He wondered how much she did know; and how nearly he ought, for the sake of entire safety, to approach the truth in answering her.

But there was only one thing to do under the circumstances, and that was to reply as best he could, and to trust to luck to carry him through.

"But," he thought to himself, "suppose that one of her people followed the inspector and the captain, when they drove uptown; suppose it is known to her that the captain did not return to headquarters with the inspector; suppose it is known to her that, when I left the central office, I went straight to my own house, and that it was Capt. Staples who mysteriously came out of that house later on. Suppose, in a word, that she is already aware of the fact that I am Nick Carter? Whew! In that case I am certainly walking into a nice fix."

But he made no remark aloud, and he did not permit the perturbation he felt to find expression on his features.

"Did you come away from the inspector's house with him?" was the next question she fired at him, and for an instant Nick was dazed by it, for he did not know exactly how he should reply; but after a pause that was imperceptible to her, he answered:

"No."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Well, I reckon I war takin' a nap when he left the house."

"When did you leave it?"

"When I woke up."

"Did you leave the house alone?"

"Nope. The other feller came there arter me."

"What other fellow? Whom do you mean?"

"The other one. The one who was at the central office with the inspector when I went there to see him."

"Do you mean Nick Carter?"

"I s'pose I do, if that is his name."

"Where did you go with him when he went to the inspector's house after you?"

"Say, miss, be I bein' cross-examined fur any perticular reason? Bekus if I be, ye might es well spit out wot it is ye want to know all at once, an' I'll answer it ef I kin. It'll save a hull lot o' time, I'm thinkin'."

"Where did you go with Nick Carter when you left the inspector's house with him?" she asked, calmly, and as if she had not heard his protest at all.

"Hanged if I know. We got into a four-wheeled craft and tacked down half a dozen streets, till finally we moored fur a minit in front of a house where he got out and left me. Arter that we got under weigh ag'in, an' afore I knowed it we were at perlice headquarters ag'in, an' I was talkin' with the inspector once more. Pete—my steward—was there, an' Corker—my third mate—was takin' on cargo over at a corner saloon. A leetle arter that we slipped our cable an' set sail fur the *Phryne*. Pete, he took the tiller, 'cos I couldn't see to steer in good shape, an' when we got aboard here he reminded me that I had promised all hands a night ashore, so I lets 'em all go, an' then I takes a book an' tries to keep from droppin' asleep by readin', 'r purtendin' to read, which is the same thing, if readin' comes es hard to you as it does to me; an' then, afore I knows it, I hear you pipin' all hands to th' quarter-deck; an' so help me that's all I knows about the hull bloody thing, an' wot's more, it's all I'm goin' ter try to say about it, too."

"That was rather a long speech for you to make, captain," she said, smiling.

"Well, it war very much to the point, fur it's wot I mean; an' ef you're goin' to take me on that air expedition of yourn to-night I think we'd better be man-nin' the halyards; hey?"

"So you still think that you would like to visit us again, do you?" she asked.

"Betcher life I do; but say, don't put nothin' into my drink to-night, will ye?"

"Possibly not. We will see about that. It may be necessary, when the time comes to bring you back to the ship."

"Not by a long shot. There ain't a soul here to interfere with you. There ain't nobody to arsk any questions of you when you bring me back; an' if you're afraid I'll see anything, all you've got to do is to——"

"Oh, I shall know very well, indeed, what to do."

"Huh! I shouldn't wonder if you would. Say, miss!"

"Well?"

"I wish you'd let me see yer hull beautiful face, will ye?"

"Possibly; a little later."

"Say, by thunder! Ye won't furgit that air half promise, will ye?"

"Nb."

"Now, wot d'ye want me to do afore we 'start? Fur I s'pose we are a-goin' to start, ain't we, Miss Scylla?"

"Yes, at once. Stand up where you are, in front of your chair. That is right. Now put your hands behind you."

Nick obeyed, and rather to his surprise, for he had not heard a sound in the cabin behind him, his hands were suddenly seized in a viselike grip, and stout cords were bound around his wrists instantly.

But he was careful to make no sound or motion of protest.

When his wrists had been firmly bound together a bandage was placed over his eyes by the same unseen hands, and the last thing he saw was the beautiful half face of the woman who stood in front of him, and there was a smile on her lips which he thought, in that instant, had taken upon itself rather a sardonic expression.

Again he felt that sensation of uneasiness, as if he were walking into some kind of trouble, and as if all would not be as smooth sailing with this girl-woman before him as he had anticipated.

And now he heard her voice again, talking rapidly to some person who stood behind him; and it was greatly to his astonishment that he could not understand what was said.

It must be remembered that Nick Carter speaks almost every known language, as well as many that are comparatively unknown; and now to hear one spoken without his having the least idea what it was, or what the words implied, was certainly a new one on him.

It was soft and musical, and flowed along as glibly as the Spanish tongue when spoken by a woman, and yet he could detect no familiar sound to it.

There was a rapid interchange of sentences between the two women—one behind him and the one who had all the time been in front of him, and then a hand grasped his arm, and he felt himself led none too gently toward the companion way.

"If ye want another cask of that wine," he said, "all ye've got to do is to send some of your folks arter it—that is, if ye know where to find it. You're es welcome es the flowers that bloom in the spring, tra, la."

There was no reply until after they had reached the deck and crossed it to the starboard side; but then a voice whispered in his ear:

"You are not to speak again, or to make a sound of any kind, until permission is given you. Do you understand that?"

"Ye say it purty middlin' plain," replied Nick.

There was silence after that, and presently he felt a rope passed under his arms and drawn tightly around his body; after that came the creaking of block and tackle, and he was hoisted from the deck, swung out over the side and then lowered into a small boat which was lying beside the ship.

There, he felt ready hands seize hold of him, and in another moment additional cords were drawn tightly around his ankles, and he was placed at full length upon some tarpaulin in the bottom of the boat.

Almost instantly it was pulled away from proximity to the *Phryne*, but after proceeding only a short distance the rowers rested on their oars and appeared to wait for something.

He wished then that he could see, but the bandage over his eyes had been well placed, and the fact that his hands were tied behind him effectually prevented him from doing anything to loosen it.

He figured that they were not more than a hundred yards from the vessel, and as he listened he could hear strange sounds proceeding from the deck of the *Phryne*, as if heavy objects were being moved about it, and he smiled to himself when he understood what those sounds meant.

"They are looting the ship from stern to stern," he thought to himself. "That is why I am tied up in this manner. They have determined to take everything of value from the ship on this trip. The opportunity is too good a one to be lost. Won't the old captain be wild when he knows about it? But still, I have not myself to blame, for if I had not interfered he would have been here alone, and would have been served in the same way."

It seemed to him, lying there, bound as he was, that the time they consumed in looting the ship was almost interminable; but after an hour or more had passed he felt that the boat he was in was moving again, and he knew that the oars had been silently dipped into the water, in obedience to some order as silently given.

After that, the motion was steadily forward, but other than the ripple of the water against the boat as it shot forward there was no sound whatever.

The people in the boat, whoever they were, remained utterly silent.

Nick had no idea who they were nor how many there might be, although he knew by the shape of the hull against which he was lying, save for the piece of tarpaulin beneath him, that the craft was a very small one, and that, therefore, there could not be many rowers at the oars.

He longed to ask a question or two, and to do something to induce his captors to talk, but he deemed it best, for many reasons, to stick to the agreement he had made, so he did not open his mouth.

But he tried to reckon the time that passed after they began to row, as well as he was able to do so, and also to decide something about the direction they followed through the water; but he speedily discovered that this latter task was an impossible one.

With the former, however, it was different.

Nobody spoke to him, and he was prohibited from ad-

dressing anyone himself, so there was nothing to prevent him from counting.

He timed the count, as well as he could, to seconds, and when at last their goal was reached, while they were lifting him from the boat into something else—and he could not for the moment get any idea of what it might be, only that he knew positively it was not another boat—he divided the product of his counting by sixty, and the dividend again by sixty, so that by the time he was out of the boat he already had the time fairly well computed in minutes.

There were eighty of them—an hour and twenty minutes.

At the rate they had been rowing through the water—and Nick knew that there had been two pairs of oars—he figured that they must have covered five or six miles, or less; and he knew that such a distance would be in keeping with his ideas about the old tunnel of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.

But he speedily forgot all sense of computation in the new developments that were taking place.

Before he was hoisted from the bottom of the boat the ropes were cast off from his ankles and wrists, and then he was told to stand upright.

He did so, and then strong arms seized him—and he marveled at the strength of these women, for he knew that they were women—he was raised bodily in the air, and passed into other hands that seemed to have been outstretched to receive him.

From these he was passed on to others, and then he felt himself thrust against a dangling rope ladder which he was ordered, in a low tone, to seize upon and to descend.

Then for the first time he realized what the captain had meant when he said that the craft he went down through was like a ship in a rough sea, for it rolled and pitched with him in a manner that gave him a feeling of nausea despite the fact that he had never been seasick in his life; and he muttered to himself:

"Of all the strange places I was ever in, this is the strangest."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

All the time that he was descending the ladder he knew that there was a person on it, beneath him, and another just above him; and they went down and down until it seemed to Nick that they must be approaching the bottom of the sea.

At last they did touch bottom—a bottom that was covered with slime and damp.

But the detective was given no time to conjecture where he might be, for immediately he was hustled forward.

He heard the clanging of iron against iron. He heard the swinging of a heavy door upon rusty hinges. He felt a rush of colder and somewhat purer air against his face. That was all.

Then he was pushed forward again, unceremoniously, and he felt that although he was walking through a wet and slimy place, where there was quite a deposit of mud, that, nevertheless, his feet trod upon a bottom that was circular in form, and that beneath the mud there was a very hard substance.

"It is certainly the tunnel," he thought, "though how we could possibly enter it from the sea is more than I can determine now."

Once he reached out one of his arms in an effort to touch the sides of the gallery with his hands, but he received a sharp blow upon his wrist which made him wince, and he did not deem it wise to repeat the effort.

All this time not a word was uttered.

He might as well have been in the company of a lot of ghosts for all the sound they made.

So surprised was he by what was taking place that he forgot to count his steps in order to reckon the distance, or the time, but he knew that they had traveled a considerable distance when at last they came to a halt and there ensued a second of clanging of iron against iron, more opening of doors, and then the ascent of a long spiral staircase.

It was up and up and up, until he was assured that the ascent here was much greater than the descent at the other end of the tunnel; and then they passed through another set of doors into a place where the air was at last pure and sweet, and which he correctly guessed was the cavern of the captain's story.

Still all was silence around him.

Hands seized upon him a second time, and he was led away through the room, another door was opened, another corridor or gallery was traversed, after which still another door was opened and he was thrust through it.

Then the touch of the hands left him.

An instant later he heard the sound of a closing door behind him and he had the feeling that he was alone.

He spoke aloud, but received no reply.

He tried it a second time, only to be met by utter silence as before.

Then he raised his hands and tore the bandage from his eyes, but he might as well have left it there, for he was in darkness so absolute that he could see nothing at all.

For a moment he stood there, undecided what to do.

Then he reached out with his hands, and when they touched nothing he took two or three cautious steps forward.

In this manner he walked from side to side of his prison until he discovered that he was in an apartment that was not more than twelve feet square; that one side

of it was circular as if it were the side of the old tunnel, and that the remaining three sides were square and firm, and formed of heavy planking.

"Humph!" he thought. "This is evidently a room that has been constructed here for this very purpose."

He regretted that he had not his electric light with him, but in making up for his disguise as the captain he had deemed it wise to leave all his usual paraphernalia at home, so that in case he was searched nothing would be found on him to lend suspicion to the people he was up against.

The consequence was that he was not only deprived of the use of his light, but that he was also without the little weapons that he ordinarily carried in his sleeves.

In fact, he was unarmed, save for his strong muscles and terrible fists, and he smiled grimly to himself when he thought of the utter absurdity of attempting to use them against women.

"I wonder what they are up to, anyhow?" he mused, half aloud. "This isn't at all the way in which they treated the old captain, and it certainly is not what he was led to expect at their hands to-night."

But there was no way to get a reply to his question, so, perceiving that the floor was dry and that some sort of a rug covered it, he felt around still further, until at last he found a couch, two chairs and a table.

He stretched himself upon the couch then, and gave himself up to awaiting developments.

But the minutes lengthened themselves into hours, and still nobody came near him, and he heard not a sound.

When he thought that the time must be long past daylight, he removed the crystal from his watch—or rather, it was the captain's watch—and felt of the hands, discovering in that way that it was past four o'clock.

After another interval which he thought must have been several hours, he felt of the hands again to discover, to his surprise, that it was only a little past five.

And so, hour after hour, at almost regular intervals, he resorted to the hands of the watch to ascertain the time, and thus marked almost every hour as it passed.

And there were many of them; very many of them.

The night waned into morning, and the morning deepened to midday; and it was not until long after two o'clock in the afternoon that he detected any sound at all.

But then he did hear something.

It was some person at his door, and presently, when it was thrown open, a gleam of light entered the room, almost blinding him for an instant.

"Say, miss," he exclaimed, before his visitor could speak, "air ye goin' to starve a mate to death, an' never once offer him a drop to drink? I didn't call fur no sich treatment es this 'ere, 'r I'll be dod-gasted ef I'd ha' come a step."

It was a merry laugh that replied to him, and a half-

masked woman, dressed as a woman should be, appeared in the doorway.

Nick knew at once that it was not the same woman who had visited him in the cabin of the ship, and he waited for her to speak.

"We quite forgot all about you," she said.

"Forgot me! Huh! That ain't fair, miss. If you'd ha' been as hungry an' dry as I be, you'd never have forgotten, I kin tell you that."

"Never mind, captain. We will make up for it now. You shall have all you want to eat and drink; you shall have your fill."

"Thank goodness fur that; an' say! Ye can't begin to sarve it any too quick, miss."

"You shall be fed and watered at once, captain."

"Watered? Who the h—ullabaloo said anything about water? Hey?"

"Well, wine, then. How will that do?"

"That's better. Say! I'm dryer'n an ol' jawbone, I am."

"Follow me, captain. Have you any idea what time it is?"

"No; but I reckon it must be about six bells next week."

The woman laughed merrily at this.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "it is late in the afternoon of what you would have called to-morrow when we brought you here."

"Is that so? What in thunder——"

"You are going to ask what has happened to the *Phryne* during that time, I suppose?"

"I suppose I was."

"Well, I can tell you that she is there at her anchorage all right. Your men have returned to her, and finding things not exactly as they expected to, they have reported the matter to the harbor police, and now the deck of your ship is swarming with officers who are chiefly engaged in looking over the sides to find the holes in the water where the thieves who visited her last night have disappeared."

"You don't say so! Well, say, there warn't any thieves aboard that craft last night that I didn't arsk to be there, and I'd thank the perlece if they'd stay away."

"Perhaps you don't know what happened to your vessel after you left her last night," said the girl, tentatively.

"Mebby I don't. Suppose you tell me, miss."

"It was looted from stem to stern."

"Was—what?"

"Looted. Stripped of everything of value."

"You don't tell me. Who done it? Hey?"

"Why, we did, of course. You don't suppose that we intended to let it go past, do you?"

"Let what go past?"

"The chance; the opportunity; the occasion."

"When'd you do it? Is that why you clean forgot me an' left me to starve and thirst?"

She laughed merrily again by way of reply; and at the same moment they stepped through into the main room of the cavern; the same room that the old captain had so graphically described.

If Nick Carter had expected to be astonished he had certainly been correct in the surmise, for if the captain's tale had, in a measure, prepared him for what he now encountered it had by no means been adequate to the real existing conditions.

The room—if it may be designated by that name, was circular in form and dome shaped at the top.

It was quite large, too, and what was still more interesting, the detective perfectly remembered it as the one he had long ago visited in company with his father, as he had explained to the inspector.

There was nothing wonderful about it when viewed from the standpoint of an engineer.

It was merely a cavity in the rocks which had formerly been filled with sand, and in the course of the excavations for the building of the tunnel it had been emptied, leaving the spacious chamber.

But if it had actually been fashioned by the hand of man it could not have been better adapted for the uses to which it had now been put.

Here and there along the sides, wherever the rocks jutted out sufficiently to form a shelf, a light had been placed, and as the captain had said, they were red and green and white, and the blended glow from all of them lent a strange and somewhat weird aspect to the place.

Next, there were the draperies which hung from the walls, and the rugs which covered the floor, as the captain had graphically described, a foot deep. And he had not been so far wrong at that, for they had been piled one upon another, possibly to keep out the natural dampness of the place.

And the couches and chairs scattered about the place, all evidently taken from ships at one time and another, gave it a cozy and homelike, yet half barbarous appearance which was particularly attractive.

But all this was as nothing compared to the general scene which met the eyes of the detective when he was conducted into the place.

It was evident to him at once that the company assembled there was awaiting him, and for an instant he felt as if he had suddenly been introduced into the saloon of some princess of the blood, as an ambassador from a foreign court.

There was not a man present save himself.

But there were women. Young women, evidently, all of them.

It is true that it was impossible to determine their ages from their appearance, since each and every one of them had her features concealed by the same form of half

mask that he had noticed before; but if one were to judge from the figures and manners of the occupants of the room it was plain to be seen that they were little more than girls, after all.

But a still greater surprise than all this awaited him.

As he advanced into the room the one who was called Scylla rose in her place and bowed profoundly to him; and at the same time, in a mocking voice, she said:

"Welcome to the cavern of Scylla the Siren, Mr. Nicholas Carter."

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE CAVERN OF THE SEA ROBBERS.

The instant his own name was uttered, Nick Carter realized that he had gotten himself into a fix from which it would be no easy matter to escape.

But he did not permit a muscle of his face to depict the surprise he felt.

Instead, he stopped still in the middle of the room, and returning the bow, said in his own natural tones:

"Madam, permit me to compliment you upon your cleverness."

There was a general laugh around the room in response to this; and then Scylla said:

"You must have taken infinite pains in the manufacture of that disguise you are wearing, Mr. Carter. It is almost perfect."

"I did; I assure you I did," replied Nick. "But why do you qualify your compliment?"

"I said it was almost perfect."

"Exactly; and all the time I believed it to be quite perfect."

"Well," she said, and her eyes sparkled with humor through the holes of her mask, "you see it is not quite perfect, for the reason that I took good care to know where Capt. Staples went and what he did, as well as all that he did, when he went ashore yesterday. To have rendered your disguise perfect you should have provided against my obtaining all that information."

"Yes; I realize that now. In fact, I have realized it almost since the instant you came to me in the cabin of the *Phryne*."

"Then I wonder that you permitted yourself to be enticed here in the manner you did."

"You see," said Nick, in a tone that was half apologetic, "I was not sure; and then, again, you were so charming."

She laughed again at this; and a ripple of laughter went the round of the group—for there were twelve others of them there, as the captain had said.

"I wish I might entreat you to remove your mask," continued Nick, with scarcely a pause in his remarks.

Without a word of remonstrance she raised one hand and deftly took the mask from her face, standing there before him in the full revelation of her almost matchless

beauty—for that she was a superbly beautiful woman was apparent at a glance.

It could not be said that she was dressed in the height of fashion unless one placed a period of time against that statement; indeed, it seemed to Nick almost as if he were in attendance upon a costume party, for there were no two of the women dressed alike.

Scylla herself was a reproduction of a Greek maiden—of another Parthenia, in fact; and among the others there were costumes representing almost every emphasized epoch in history, and in mythology as well.

But it was upon the queen of this assemblage that the eyes of the detective were fixed.

She had known well what manner of costume would become her best, and she had adopted it.

As she stood there before him, her lips parted in a half smile, her white teeth gleaming between them, her black, sloelike eyes sparkling with ill-concealed amusement, and with her beautiful and stately figure poised in an attitude of perfect, if unstudied, grace, she seemed the embodiment of personified beauty.

Nick had expected that she would at least demur to his request that she remove her mask, if she did not altogether refuse to do so, and he was agreeably surprised when, without the least hesitation, she did as he had asked.

He argued rather ill for it, too.

He could see in the act one of two things, neither of which argued in favor of his own safety.

The act assured him that these women had no fear that he would escape from them, or they believed that by reason of their charm, and their sex, they could prevail upon him to be merciful.

He could not believe that a lot of women—of beautiful women, too—would actually murder him in cold blood, and yet he was forced to admit to himself that some of the most heartless criminals he had ever encountered had been women.

And here was a group of them, banded together in crime.

Here was the mystic number of thirteen of them, professedly pirates of the sea, and therefore, perforce, robbers and possibly murderers as well, who had sought a retreat that was so cleverly hidden that it would defy discovery; and he was absolutely in their power.

True, he stood there before them, with his hands free, and every faculty on the alert; but he was unarmed.

But even had he been bristling with weapons, he realized that he could not have made use of them to fight his way out.

A man cannot fight a woman; a man will not fight a woman.

He may, on occasion, overpower her and force her to conform to his ideas of right, but he cannot engage in a combat against her as he would do against a man.

It might be said that all this passed through the brain of the detective in that instant which intervened between his request that Scylla remove her mask and the actual act on her part, and he caught his breath when her startling beauty was revealed to him so suddenly.

"You are beautiful—very beautiful," he said.

She smiled, and replied:

"The remark is not original. I have been told that before—by others."

"I have no doubt of it. The remark may not of itself be original, but it would not require much of a stretch of the imagination to say that you are the type of original beauty."

"You are almost as neat at turning compliments, Nick Carter, as you are in the matter of disguises," she said.

"Better, madam; there is no flaw in my remark; there was, in my disguise."

She laughed gleefully at that.

"I have removed my mask at your request," she said; "will you not wash away that hideous disguise to please me?"

"Certainly; if you have some alcohol, some cocoa butter, and a more fitting costume than this one, that I may adopt after I have made the old captain disappear."

"We have everything that you require," she replied. "Indeed, I anticipated this moment. If you will follow me, you will find everything that you require—here."

She stepped back and drew aside a curtain as she spoke, and Nick passed beyond it into a small room that had been curtained off from the larger one.

It was lighted brilliantly, and arranged around it Nick discovered everything that he required for the change he was to make, while across a chair rested a costume which needed only a glance to tell him that it represented the character of Sardanapalus.

Left to himself, he at once busied himself in making the changes, washing the pigments from his face, hands and arms, and removing the gray hair and whiskers which had so perfectly represented the old captain, but which had proven so utterly useless.

He was occupied all of half an hour in this manner, after which he donned the costume that had been provided for him; but he took care to place the cast-off garments that he had worn as the captain where he could find them again if it should happen that he required them, for he well knew that it was doubtless a part of their scheme that he could not go out from that cavern in the costume of a Sardanapalus without being subject to arrest as a lunatic, before he traveled a mile.

But when he returned to the larger room he was transformed.

Every vestige of the disguise had been removed, and his handsome face shone with the excitement of the adventure as he stepped out before his strange hostesses; nor could anything have been more becoming than the

costume they had provided for him, for it set off the lines of his manly figure to perfection.

If he had been surprised when the queen of the sea robbers unmasked before him, it was her turn to evince astonishment; but she showed it merely by a deeper flush which suffused her beautiful face; as for the others, they were still masked, as Nick had first seen them.

He bowed low to them all with mock ceremoniousness.

"Will not the other ladies permit me to see their faces also?" he asked.

As if they had been only awaiting the request, twelve hands were raised to twelve masks, as with one motion, and they were removed; and the detective gazed upon them in amazement.

He had expected that among so many there would be at least one who could not lay claim to surpassing beauty; but here were thirteen young women before him, each more beautiful than any other one—if such a paradox were possible.

For a moment he was almost speechless, and then, with a sigh, he said:

"Years ago, when I was a boy, I read the story of the 'Roc's Egg,' and of the forty beautiful maidens who dwelt alone in a palace. I feel now as if I had stepped down into that scene in person."

"But here are only thirteen instead of forty," said Scylla the Siren.

"Ay; but all the beauty of the forty has been condensed into the thirteen," he retorted.

"You think, then, that you have fallen into good hands?" she asked.

"I know at least that I have fallen into fair hands."

"And do you not regard yourself as standing in danger, Mr. Carter?"

"Frankly, I never was in such imminent peril in my life. Being somewhat of a stoic, I might resist the fascinations of one; but of thirteen——"

"I am afraid that you are not entirely sincere."

"Heaven grant that I am not, for then I should surely fall a victim before you."

"You are incorrigible."

"I am also hungry, madam."

A peal of laughter replied to this sally, for they had quite forgotten that he had not been fed for hours, and, forthwith, cold chicken, some salad, wine, etc., were placed before him and he was bidden to eat and drink.

While he was thus engaged, Scylla waited upon him in person, and if we might have looked in upon the scene at that moment it might well have been thought to represent anything but what it really did.

"What disposition shall we make of you, Mr. Carter?" Scylla asked, when the detective's appetite was partly appeased.

"I might reply to that," he said, smiling, "if I were the sultan of Turkey, or at the head of the Mormon church."

She affected not to notice his reply, but continued:

"You are aware, of course, that we can never permit you to go free from this place without at least exacting a pledge of secrecy from you."

"Something of that sort has occurred to me, I will admit," he said.

"And are you prepared to make such a pledge?"

"You see," he replied, poising his fork as the leader of an orchestra might have used a baton, "I am for the moment literally between Scylla and Charybdis. I——"

"The time for fecetiousness has passed, Mr. Carter. I am speaking in deadly earnest."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. Are you prepared to make us such a pledge?"

"Suppose I should say 'No'; what then?"

"It would be bad for you."

"May I ask in what manner it would be bad for me?"

"You would at once place yourself in imminent peril."

"Peril of what?"

"Of death, Mr. Carter."

"Do you mean that you would kill me?"

"I mean that you can never leave this tunnel alive without first having made the pledge I have demanded."

"Would you murder me?"

"That is an ugly word."

"But it has a clear meaning. There is no other word to express what I mean."

"You can never leave this place alive unless you swear a solemn oath never to reveal what you have seen here, what you know of us, or what you suspect concerning the locality of this place, and the business that I and my friends here follow."

"Then, if I refuse to take the oath, you will put me to death; eh? Is that it?"

"We cannot keep you here. That is evident. You cannot leave the place alive. You may draw your own conclusions."

Nick smiled into her eyes as he said, slowly:

"Death at the hands of one so beautiful as you might be a new form of ecstasy, Madame Scylla the Siren."

CHAPTER X.

THE DETECTIVE'S TERRIBLE PERIL.

The detective could see that the woman was in deadly earnest.

He could discern, moreover, that she was troubled; as if the necessity which the presence of the detective put upon her was not a welcome one by any means.

"You give me the choice between death and dishonor," he said, quietly.

"Do you regard it as stultifying your honor to refuse to betray a woman? Or, rather, thirteen women?" she asked, calmly.

"I must reply to that question by asking another," he said.

"Well, what is it?"

"Do you not think that you voluntarily put yourself outside the pale of womanhood, in so far as it can lay claim to the protection of man, when you adopt a profession such as you have done?"

"That is neither here nor there," she replied.

"Oh, yes it is. Very much here and there, both."

"I must still insist upon an answer to my question."

"Then I must reply that to me you are only sea robbers here. I can recognize no sex in the performance of my duty."

"And you consider that duty to be to hound me and my friends to prison, do you?"

"I consider it my duty to place all malefactors beyond the power to commit further trespass upon the laws of the land, when it is in my power to do so," he said.

"You have said that I am beautiful, Mr. Carter."

"And I have no hesitation in repeating that statement, madam."

"Would you condemn my beauty to a prison cell?"

"If it were necessary in the pursuit of my calling—yes."

"And, likewise, these twelve friends and followers of mine?"

"Likewise all of them."

"You would not take an oath to blot out from your recollection all the experiences you have met with since yesterday?"

"I could not."

"If we release you, and permit you to go from here free, do I understand that you will at once begin a campaign against us?"

"Such would be my plain duty."

"That is not the question. The question is, would you do so?"

"I most certainly would do so."

"Then, Nick Carter, you must die."

"It is not the first time, or the only time when that remark has been made to me, madam, and frequently it has been said under much more trying circumstances than this."

"But it has never been said to you with more deadly earnestness, sir."

"I will grant that you mean it. What then?"

"What then? There can be but one thing after that?"

"And that is——"

"You might call it the fulfillment of the prophecy."

"You will put me to death?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Does it matter how, Mr. Carter?"

"Ay," he said, laughing into her troubled eyes—for they were troubled, and he saw it; and for reasons of his own he thought it wise at this moment to anger her if possible, since through anger only did he believe that he could induce her to talk more plainly of her intentions.

"Ay," he repeated, "you might smother me with kisses; that would be an ecstatic death. Or you and your twelve friends might take turns at the execution, and the ecstasy would then be twelvefold greater."

She looked at him a moment without replying; and then, quite calmly, she said:

"Mr. Carter, if I did not know that you do not mean that remark as it sounds; you would have accomplished your purpose in making it, and I would be angry. As it is, you have only needlessly hurt me."

"Then I will beg your pardon. There are moments when you make me forget what you are, and I remember only that you are a young and a beautiful woman; and there are other moments when I cannot help recalling the fact that you are—or profess to be—a siren, a sea robber, a criminal and a thief."

She flushed angrily, but he went on, imperturbably:

"Those are harsh words, doubtless, but they are true ones. A thief is a thief, despite the costume or the sex; and this assemblage here is nothing more nor less than a gang of thieves, is it not?"

"Have your way if you will."

"It is more than that, madam. It is a gang of thieves

which is about to resolve itself into a gang of murderers. There are no two ways about that, are there?"

While this dialogue was taking place the remaining twelve of the women had grouped themselves behind their queen, and Nick found it rather a difficult task to retain his composure with thirteen pairs of eyes fixed intently upon his face, and each pair with a different expression.

He could read hate in some of them; in others, sadness; in others, regret; and collectively they represented the whole gamut of emotions.

But not in one pair of eyes among them all did he discover the requisite friendly glance which could be relied upon to undertake to free him from his peril.

And it was at this point in their conversation that Scylla rose from the chair she had occupied opposite him, and, turning to the others, drew them aside.

Nick, perceiving that they were about to discuss him, and doubtless also the manner in which he would be put to death, pretended to attack again the food that had been placed before him.

But it was only pretense.

He knew that the time had come for him to act if, indeed, he acted at all, to save himself from the consequences of the danger in which he stood.

He had kept his eyes busy while he talked with Scylla, but, although he had looked everywhere, he had been unable to decide where the beautiful sea robbers kept their weapons.

That there were plenty of them in the cavern, he did not doubt; and at last he fixed upon a huge sea chest, inlaid with gold and silver, that stood at one side of the apartment, as being the repository for them:

Now, as they drew aside and conversed together in low tones, of which he could catch no word at all, and while he pretended again to be interested only in the food and drink that had been placed before him, he was in reality gathering himself for a leap toward that chest.

He calculated to a nicety the instant when he made the spring, and he figured that if he was only correct in his conjecture, and the chest were not locked, that he would soon be in a position at least to defy these strange, if beautiful, women.

And then he made the leap.

With a sudden move he threw the chair to the floor behind him, and sprang toward the chest.

He reached it even as they turned toward him, and he

threw the lid back as Scylla herself started forward to intercept him.

He had been right.

One glance inside convinced him of that, for it was half filled with a collection of pistols and swords, rapiers and cutlasses.

He seized two of the weapons; a long, slender, gleaming rapier in his right hand, and a business-like-looking revolver in his left hand.

He did not know whether it was loaded or not, and he did not much care, for he had no idea of making use of the firearm for more than intimidation.

It was the rapier upon which he depended, for he was master of the art of its use, and he knew that with it in his hand he could play with the women, and drive them into one corner of the cavern without inflicting any injury upon any of them which would be worthy of the name.

But he had to do with women who were vastly different from any that he had ever met before.

He remembered, for that moment, only that they were women; but now he was speedily to discover that they were more—that they were what he had called them—criminals; and that they were desperate and fearless.

When Scylla perceived that the detective had succeeded in possessing himself of the weapons, she laughed aloud, and, with a bound, returned to her place beside her followers.

Then she uttered a sharp command, and the result was that in that instant each one of them raised her right hand, and Nick found that he was looking into the muzzles of thirteen revolvers.

He had not expected them to be so fully prepared, but he laughed aloud when he saw how ready they were to meet him halfway.

"Drop those weapons instantly!" said Scylla, coldly, to him; but he only laughed at her, standing on his guard with the rapier firmly grasped in his right hand.

"Put down those weapons!" she repeated.

"I will not," replied Nick. "What do you suppose I possessed myself of them for?"

"Not to use against women, Nick Carter. I think that I know you too well for that."

"You have ceased to be women in my estimation, now. You are only thieves and murderers."

"Beware, Nick Carter! You may wag that tongue of yours too freely."

Nick smiled at her derisively.

"I repeat," he said; "you are only thieves and murderers."

"Put down those weapons."

"I will not."

"Then I shall give the order to fire."

"Do so. It will be as easy a death as any other; but I also think that I know you too well for that. You have selected some choicer method of putting me out of the way than by the use of bullets."

She smiled at him in derision.

"Even if we were all unarmed; even if there were no impediment in your way, you could not escape from this cavern," said Scylla. "You could never find your way out of it."

"That remains to be seen," replied the detective. "I have found my way out of worse places than this before now."

"Will you drop those weapons?"

"No."

"Are you determined to die?"

"You seem to be determined to kill me. Why don't you do it?"

"Nick Carter, listen to me. It goes very much against us to put you to death. That is the matter we were discussing just now when you interrupted us."

"I suppose I should consider that a very kind act on your part; eh?"

"You have but to take that oath I asked you to do, and you will be set free."

"But that is out of the question."

"Why do you force us to this act?"

"I might reply by asking you why you brought me here?"

"To force you to take the oath."

"And that you will never succeed in doing."

"Is that your last answer?"

"Yes. It is."

"You have thought well over the consequences?"

"Oh, yes; but I am tired of discussing it with you."

"You do not think that I will dare to kill you, perhaps?"

"I think you would dare almost anything, Scylla."

"For the last time, do you refuse to take the oath?"

"I do," he replied.

"Fire!" she said, wheeling and facing her followers; and the twelve revolvers blazed out upon him with a detonation that was deafening.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EXECUTION OF THE SENTENCE.

The detective had not expected the sudden order to fire.

In reality, he believed that the attitude of Scylla was more of a bluff than anything else, and in this idea he was presently to find that he was correct, although in a different manner than he had anticipated.

If he had expected the women to fire so soon, he could have done nothing to escape the effect of the bullets—had there been bullets in the cartridges.

But as it happened there were none there.

The twelve revolvers that had been leveled at him, and that had been fired almost in his face, were loaded with blank cartridges, placed there for that especial purpose—to intimidate him.

But if they were not loaded, they had almost as much an effect upon the detective as if they were.

The women, when they fired the revolvers, were not more than ten feet away from him, and the twelve weapons, being exploded at once almost in his face, sending sheets of flame toward him as they did, created a shock which was in a sense almost as startling as the impact of bullets against his body might have been.

He was thrown down, flat on his back, as if he had been hit by a club, and in that instant, although he was actually unharmed, he felt as if every hair on his head had been burned off, and as if the drums of his ears had burst.

But if he was not prepared for what actually occurred, the women were.

The instant they fired their revolvers, they leaped forward, and the detective was no sooner on his back where he had fallen than a blanket was thrown over him, and it seemed to him as if the entire twelve of his assailants piled themselves on top of him at once.

Struggle he did, but his efforts were as fruitless as if he had been held down by so many giants.

The blanket that had been thrown over him impeded the use of his arms and legs and he was practically helpless in their hands.

Nor did it take them long to bind him so that he was rendered entirely so.

Considering the fact that they were women, they were possessed of prodigious strength, and presently, when they drew away from him, he had been triced up in a

manner that would have excited the envy of Capt. Staples himself.

They placed him, then, none too gently in the chair he had lately occupied; and then, once more, they grouped themselves at the other side of the table in the positions they had occupied while he was engaged in consuming his luncheon.

"You perceive," said Scylla, coldly, "that women can act when the occasion arises to do so, Nick Carter."

"I will have to admit that you are right about that."

"You are now a helpless prisoner."

"Isn't that the condition that has existed since you brought me here?" he asked.

"Yes. Shall I ask you again if you will take the oath we require of you?"

"It is unnecessary. The reply would be the same."

Scylla turned and motioned silently to one of her companions, who disengaged herself from the group; but she returned after a moment with a bandage in her hands, which, without preamble, she proceeded at once to bind tightly over the eyes of the detective.

"Am I not to have the honor of witnessing the manner of my death?" asked the detective.

"Not even that; but you will know soon enough how it is to be consummated."

"Am I to be drawn and quartered? Shot to death? Stabbed? Choked? Smothered? Bled? Or what is your barbarous notions of such enterprises?"

"You are to be drowned," she said, coldly.

Nick felt that a shudder passed through him, although he did not permit it to manifest itself to them.

"Drowned?" he repeated after her.

"Yes."

"I have heard that drowning is not an unpleasant experience, after the first swallow of water."

"You shall have an opportunity to make certain about that presently."

"Drowned, eh? In the bay?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Now."

Again she signaled to her followers, and now several of them approached him.

They raised him from the chair in their arms. Others brought a rude sort of a stretcher forward from one corner of the room and the detective was placed upon it.

He could see nothing, of course, but he presently felt

that they raised him from the floor and that a solemn march was begun toward one end of the cavern—the end, he thought, by which he had first been brought into the place.

Again he heard the iron doors open before them.

Again he was taken through a short corridor, and then he was lifted from the stretcher by two of the women, and carried down the winding, spiral stairway to the bottom.

That reached, the stretcher was again brought into use, and he knew by the odor of the place as they proceeded that they were once more traversing that tunnel where the mud and slime still covered the bottom of it.

He could not doubt now that they had meant what they said.

He recalled the strange method by which they had entered the place; from a boat into something that rocked and swayed with their weight when they entered it, and he wondered what sort of a place or contrivance it could be.

"At least," he thought, as they proceeded, "they will find it difficult to carry me to the top of that rope ladder, and, if I refuse to climb, it may place them at some inconvenience."

But nothing of the kind occurred.

When they arrived at the end of the tunnel and the last iron doors had been opened and they had passed through them, the stretcher was set down for a moment, and then he felt that a rope was being passed under his arms.

Presently he knew that some of them were mounting the ladder, and after a little he felt the rope tighten against his body, and then he was lifted into the air and borne swiftly upward.

"Humph!" he thought. "They got around that difficulty without much trouble. I wonder now what will happen next?"

Again he felt that he was inside the swaying, moving, rocking thing which defied all his imagination to guess what it might be, and again he had that experience of indefinite seasickness that he had felt before.

Then, suddenly, a light broke upon his reasoning powers.

It came to him when he heard what sounded like the opening of an iron hatch above his head.

"By all the powers!" he thought to himself, "I believe on my word that we are inside a huge government buoy.

A buoy which these people have somehow managed to connect with the old tunnel. It seems impossible, but it must be true. It is the only way in which this strange experience can be explained."

But he was not given time for further conjecture.

The cold voice of Scylla the Siren broke in upon his reflections.

"Do you know where you are?" she asked.

"I should imagine that I am inside a big buoy which I know is located near——"

"You know altogether too much, Nick Carter."

"Yes. I suppose so; for your good, you mean."

He felt that some article was being tied to his legs; but she continued to talk while it was being done.

"There is a hundred pound of iron fast to your feet now," she said.

"I perceive that you have fastened something to me."

"In a moment we shall drop you into the water. It is forty feet deep here."

"That should be sufficient, I think."

"You will keep guard, hereafter, at the base of this shaft."

"A silent guard, eh?"

"A dead guard."

"Will you not do me the favor to take the bandage from my eyes before you cast me into the water, in order that I may have one more look at your face, Scylla?"

Without replying in words, she tore the bandage from his eyes, and he saw in that instant that she was alone with him; that her companions had disappeared.

The next, he felt himself sliding toward the brink.

He could offer no resistance whatever, for he was firmly bound.

Then there came a sudden lurch. He slipped from the buoy and glided downward into the sea, while the waters closed over him.

And the last that he saw as he disappeared were the eyes of Scylla the Siren gazing, with a strange expression, into his own.

CHAPTER XII.

A DARING RESCUE.

The detective had in a measure prepared himself for the ordeal.

He had drawn in a full breath of air, and his lungs were well filled when he was so suddenly precipitated into the water.

As he felt himself going down, down, down into the depths, he sought with all his strength to tear his hands loose from the cords which held them, and so to free himself from the terrible weight that was dragging him down.

But the effort was utterly futile.

Strive as he might, he could accomplish nothing whatever, and as he descended and the pressure of the water became heavier against him, he gave himself up for lost.

The descent was, of course, rapid, with the hundred pounds of iron fastened to his feet, and he touched the bottom much sooner than he expected, if indeed the depth was as great as he had been told.

All the time he kept his eyes open, looking upward at the light he was leaving; for it was yet daylight outside, and he could see through the water as it closed over his head that the sun was shining brightly.

And then he saw something more.

He saw a flash of glistening color cleave the waters over him.

For one instant he believed that it was the belly of a shark that had witnessed the execution and was about to play a part in it.

But he knew that no shark could be arrayed in such resplendent colors.

The thing, whatever it was, came nearer. Indeed it seemed to approach with the rapidity of a fish, and then he saw that it was a human being.

More; it was a woman.

Still more, it was a woman arrayed as he had first seen Scylla in the cabin of the ship *Phryne*.

Was it Scylla? He could not answer that, though, in the imperfect light that was afforded him. He only knew that it was a woman; that it was one of the women he had seen in the cavern in the cliffs; that for some reason she was swimming toward him.

For what purpose?

He could not answer that, either.

Doubtless it was to make sure that he did not escape from the bonds that held him, to rise to the surface and to menace the safety of the thirteen women of the cavern.

All this happened during a few seconds; but nevertheless he felt that he was rapidly arriving at a point where he could not hold his breath longer, and when he must permit his mouth to open and the water to rush in and strangle him.

Then the form of the woman, arrayed in the glistening scales of her costume, glided directly to him.

He felt that she touched him.

More, he could feel that she was engaged in doing something that was foreign to what he had expected, for her hand glided along his body until suddenly he felt the weight leave his legs as if by magic, and instantly his body shot upward again toward the surface.

Even as it did so, the woman again used her knife, and this time she severed the cords that held his wrists, and in that instant he was free indeed.

He made a motion to strike out with his hands, but he felt that she was pulling him, and with a heroic effort he determined to hold his breath a little longer, even if his lungs should burst, and he followed her.

The rapidity with which all this happened must be taken into account in order to understand how it could have occurred, for it was only a second or two after that when he found that he was at the surface of the water, clinging to the sides of the buoy, and that his rescuer was beside him.

That draught of sweet air that he took in then was delicious; but he managed to gasp:

"You are Scylla, and you have saved me!"

She made no reply in words, but she motioned to him to follow her, and then she swam around to the opposite side of the buoy.

In a moment more they were upon it.

In another she had made use of a key that was fastened around her neck by a small gold chain, and in the next, she had unlocked the trapdoor in the buoy.

He clung to the sides of the place, looking down into the depths of the shaft at the rope ladder that had so deeply mystified him; and when he turned again toward his companion, to question her, she had disappeared.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but she was gone; and he was clinging there to the buoy, with the way open to him to the cavern of the sea robbers.

But he had no thought of that in that instant. It was of Scylla that he thought, if indeed the woman were Scylla, which he now doubted, although the resemblance between them was strong.

He released his hold upon the buoy and permitted himself to sink again into the water, but, although he looked and searched in every direction, he could discover no sign of his mysterious rescuer.

After a little he turned his attention again to the trap-

door in the buoy, and he saw that the key to it was still in the lock, and that the woman had wrenched it free from the chain in order to leave it there.

Her reason for doing so was obvious.

He closed the door again and locked it, and then, being thoroughly rested from his terrifying experience, he permitted himself to glide back again into the water, after which he struck out for the shore.

* * * * *

It was midnight when Nick Carter returned again to that floating buoy, but this time he was differently dressed, and there were a dozen men with him in the boat that took him there.

The night was not a dark one, and it was not difficult to find the buoy; nor to enter it when it was once found.

The detective led the way down the ladder.

The iron doors at the foot of the shaft, which he had heard opened when he was conducted there, were not locked, and he had no difficulty in opening them, and thus, followed by the men who were with him, he made his way along the gallery, through the remaining doors, and up the spiral staircase to the top.

At the last door, before entering the cavern room where he had met with such a strange experience, he paused long enough to give the last directions to his men, and then suddenly he thrust the door open and appeared upon the threshold.

The sea robbers—the twelve beautiful women, for he noticed in the first glance that one of them was absent—were seated around the table, evidently at dinner.

The surprise was complete.

It is true that they leaped to their feet, but only to confront Nick and his men, and to realize that resistance was useless.

"You see," said Nick to Scylla, for it was she who stood first in front of him, "that, in spite of all, I have returned."

"Yes," she replied, scornfully, "aided by a traitor. You see there are only twelve of us now. The thirteenth—my sister—proved a traitor. We should have been gone from here in an hour, Nick Carter."

"And you *will* be gone from here in an hour," he replied, grimly.

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